

THE IDEOLOGY OF TYRANNY

*Bataille, Foucault, and the Postmodern
Corruption of Political Dissent*

GUIDO GIACOMO PREPARATA



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To my father, Giuliano (1942–2000).

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Like all propagandists, the apostles of tolerance, truth to tell, are very often the most intolerant of men. This is in fact what happened, and it is strangely ironical: those who wished to overthrow all dogma have created for their own use, we will not say a new dogma, but a caricature of a dogma, which they have succeeded in imposing [on the western world in general]; in this way there have been established, under the pretext of “freedom of thought”, the most chimerical beliefs that have ever been seen at any time, under the form of [. . .] different idols.

René Guénon, *East & West*.¹

¹René Guénon, *East & West* (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001 [1924]), p. 28.

Preface

The world may wonder what possesses the collective spirit of America these days. The voice of the press claims it is a blind fury for conquest, mindless greed, or some such low drive that is responsible for the pervasive malaise of our time. The apologists demur and counter that what is observed is but the fierce and often confused reaction to external violence, a response to unfathomable threats. And the public intellectuals drop in the final word, intimating to us all that such an incontrollable distress is the incontrollable outcome of our world's fragmentation—we live, they admonish, in an environment that reacts to Western business's global reach by exploding a desire to manifest a congeries of different, diverse "faces": the world, they say, is finally unraveling in a tangle of ethnicities, lingoes, attitudes, and moods reducible to no common denominator. The era of rationality, progress, right and wrong, the era of *modernity*, the learned clamor, is finished. In its stead we are left to grapple with the uncertainty of the *postmodern* epoch. Our epoch. According to this new way of interpreting social events, we live in a world where power is "decentered," where old antagonisms have melted in a myriad of "particularisms," where "*universals*" matter no more. And, hence to wage battles in the name of these universals is perceived by the new "postmodern" apostles to be but a waste of time, a misplaced endeavor.

The desire that has led me to write this piece was to account in some fashion for the utter disarray that has been plaguing the movement of political dissent in America and the West. And it is my belief that one of the chief causes of this state of paralysis is indeed the establishment's endorsement of this "creed of divisiveness": the so-called *postmodern* politics of diversity.

It has been now over a decade that the catchy buzzword of "postmodernism" has made a wide warm nest for itself in the English language and in American public discourse. So much so that it hardly attracts attention anymore, and the fuss that led to its introduction in the United States a generation ago is now appropriately considered the concern of only a few academic antiquarians. And yet, as it usually happens, the story of this peculiar cultural import is revelatory—revelatory in that the mindset of the American intellectual elite appears to be under the influence of beliefs that are somewhat *alien* to those prevailing in Europe and elsewhere in the world. As this study will show, this

relatively recent creed—which is indeed but a modern re-elaboration of ancient, chaotic forms of dissidence—has driven its supporters to borrow wholesale the constructs of the late antihumanist French school with a view to giving formal, dignified expression to the late political and religious posture of the American Left. A Left that by the end of the seventies had come out thoroughly defeated by the system it had so confusedly antagonized for a decade and a half. In other words, this book tells the story of how the American intelligentsia ended up importing from France a peculiar jargon and imagery with which to articulate the new politics of diversity. This queer American adaptation of French speculative reverie has yielded a hybrid, which seems to have so far incapacitated the critical and analytical faculties of students and scholars under its sway.

Repeatedly have we heard the dissenting opinion blaming America for her barbarous fascination with “empire” and domination, which are said to be presently living a second youth with the superstitious nationalism of *Neoconservatism* and the neoLiberal enthusiasm for “outsourcing” and “globalization.” More interestingly, beyond the American conservative, bellicose animus, there is another form of devoutness, which at first glance seems to be at cross-purposes with the civic idolatry of White Protestantism, but which ultimately works to feed the late patriotic shiver and the anxiety-driven truculence of the average American. This other form of fanaticism speaks through, makes use of, and reshapes constantly the teachings of the French postmodern school. Such a singular catechism has lately assumed a sudden preeminence in the varied phraseology of public opinion, and as proof of its extraordinary powers of suggestion stands the fact that its rhetoric does frame not only the analyses of the contemporary Left but the visions of the Neoconservative hawks as well.

For instance, a curious “meeting of the postmodern minds,” so to speak, occurred in the aftermath of 9/11, when a cultural critic belonging to the erstwhile anarchistic wing of the American Left joined hands figuratively with the propagandistic effort of the First Lady by celebrating the blast in Afghanistan of October 2001 as “the first feminist war in all history.”¹ It so seemed that America’s retaliatory “War on Terror” and Bush II’s overarching “compassionate conservatism” were by insensible degrees attempting to absorb in its stream the bulging movement advocating diversity (feminism being one offshoot of the Left’s new mania for singularities and a never-ending realm of *difference*).

This was postmodern political correctness working cheek by jowl with administrative authoritarianism: *this was something new*.

Manifestations of this kind lead to surmise that the United States is held hostage to the influence of two pernicious forces: a worship of violence embodied by the traditional Right, and a frantic materialism of the postmodern sort, which has impeached *active* dissent and opposition to the patent oligarchic deviancy of modern so-called Liberal democracies. Thereby, the postmodernism of the Left has corroborated the Right.

So far the debate on postmodernism has been the staple of highbrow conversations restricted to a clan of pundits who have been fighting one another with ever more intricate arguments and counterarguments drawn from the

philosophical tradition of the modern West. What have they all argued about? On one side, with a constant advertence to the holocausts of World War II, the French postmodern avatars and their American epigones have celebrated the end of reason, truth, and absolutist scientism, while their positivist opponents from both ends of the political spectrum have denied such claims. In the long run, however, the postmodernists have carried the day: school and university curricula in the United States have, for the most part, converted to the discourse of diversity, multiplicity, and unbridgeable “difference.” There were obvious political *motives* and gains for doing so, and one of the principal aims of this study is to fathom what these motives were.

In the postmodernist camp, by pushing to the extreme this aggressive inveccive against the dogmas of truth, beauty, and the divine, by celebrating the “diverse,” the postcolonial “Other,” the “black” versus the “white,” the female versus the male, and the homosexual versus the heterosexual, the learned class has driven itself into a corner and created a general state of apartheid, whereby groups, defined by gender, race, or creed come to assume radical positions and end up cutting off all communication between one another. This entrenchment, moreover, has played efficiently in the propaganda of the bureaucratic machine, which has managed to counterfeit its geopolitical imbroglios in the Near East and Central Asia as wars of liberation in the name of freedom and democracy (the “Liberal” ethos), as well as “diversity” (the postmodern pose).

The occult motivations and affinities that have brought the language of conquest to appropriate the new jargon of the counterculture may be uncovered by looking inside the works of the late French masters.

The guru whose work came to be imported and re-elaborated in the course of the seventies and eighties was Michel Foucault (1926–1984). Foucault’s Theory of Power has become the cornerstone of much public discourse in America—from academia to government by way of education curricula. Since its successful launch in the United States a quarter of a century ago, Foucault’s philosophy has gradually come to be adopted as the idiom of America’s intellectual Left. Enthusiastic hordes of academics, publicists, and educators have fished from the Foucauldian universe ideas, metaphors, neologisms, and similes that have enabled them to articulate to their hearts’ desire the inquietude of America’s social condition. Not only has postmodernism ever since become the State-sponsored factory of *political correctness* in America, but, paradoxically, it has also come to impose itself as the exclusive voice of reason and tolerance in higher learning. This is all the more astonishing as Foucault’s manifest worship of damnation, blood, and transgression, as shall be argued, is in fact the rational expression of a strange exhumation of ancient, antitraditional cosmogonies. A revival, which, for the most part, had indeed been brilliantly elaborated by the end of the thirties by the true master of Foucault and of all the new French *philosophes*: the accursed sociologist/pornographer Georges Bataille (1897–1962).

Bataille’s literary and philosophical “project” (*le projet*) was conceived to weaken the bonds of compassion that, in his view, *tenuously* held society together. His

sociology—a unique and genially disquieting collection of insights scarcely known to the English-speaking public—is possibly one of the central intellectual creations of the twentieth century in the realm of the social sciences. It is an enigmatic enterprise, blending lyricism, political economy, and a refashioning of religion, which is indirectly having (mostly through Foucault's elaboration) a lasting effect on the talk of America. And the vast majority of American postmodernists do not even seem aware of their being tributaries of such a strange project.

Unlike other monographs on Bataille, which depict him merely as a Nietzschean, this work places emphasis on his profound originality and describes how in fact his cherished “work of contamination and contagion,” as he put it, was a unique—mostly hypnotic and aesthetic—reenacting in a modern setting of ancient antimontheistic worship: a revamped cult of Dionysus and of the White Goddess, and of its late philosophic expression into Gnosis. Foucault surreptitiously re-elaborated the Bataillean mythology and modified it also to fit the political needs of the American Left, which by the seventies had been redefined as a “multicultural” ministry of sorts. What is striking, and what this book's detailed study of Bataille's opus will reveal, is that the American Left has paradoxically embraced a creed that, rather than compassionate, is the precise opposite. So in closing the circle, we come to the conclusion that today in America the jargon and the myths upheld by the self-appointed party of emancipation were originally fashioned by France's most lucid advocate of religious violence and moral turpitude.

And what is more, the credence prevailing on the opposite bank of the Neoconservative Right is essentially the same as that underlying the arguments and metaphors of the postmodern Left. That is why we may speak of “postmodernism of the Right.” Each faction has recited the part ascribed to it by a consensus-building method, which relies on the chronic antagonism between the official Right and the official Left. As we shall have occasion to argue, the belief system of those conservative intellectuals who have hitherto been active in the administration of Bush II presents a deep affinity with the views of Bataille himself. All of which goes to show that this game of opposition between the Right-and the Left-wing of postmodernism is ultimately a cooperation of sorts; it is an institutionalized enmity sustained on the one hand to keep up the figment of open and democratic debate, and, more importantly, to block any form of alternative dissent, on the other.

Because postmodernism is anticompassionate and strongly divisive, it is no accident—and this is the main thesis of *The Ideology of Tyranny*—that it has been adopted by the U.S. administration, an administration that has grown increasingly more effective and sophisticated in taming, neutralizing, deflecting, and suppressing any form of dissidence. What seems to have so far functioned satisfactorily for this bureaucracy, then, is the combination of standard intimidatory tactics (police bullying and administrative sanctions), with the ideological diffusion of a gospel of divisiveness across society (in the schools and the workplace). The state of paralysis induced by the fluid dissemination of such a gospel has been extraordinary, far more crippling, in fact, than the old contraposition

between Socialists and Liberals. And, as such, postmodernism has configured itself as the new, potent ideology of tyranny.

This study will begin with a cursory examination of the degenerate religious cults (chapter 2: the Great Goddess and Dionysus), whose tradition Bataille—through experience, sentiment, affinity, and research—sought to revive, aesthetically, in the twentieth century. A brief mention of gnosticism (chapter 3) and its parallels with postmodernism, followed by a note on the Marquis de Sade (chapter 4), precedes the central discussion of Bataille’s production; Sade is a hero to Bataille, Foucault, and the postmodern following. Divided into five subsections (Mystique, the Monstrous Archons, Eroticism, Expenditure, and Power), the chapter devoted to Bataille (chapter 5) is succeeded by a biographical exploration of Foucault’s vision and of his critical elaboration of the Bataillean project. Chapter 6 traces the ways in which Foucault crafted the theory of Power/Knowledge, and how and why it came to be imported and adapted by the American intelligentsia. Chapter 7 (“The Mocking Varlets of Postmodern Left”) features a sample of postmodernist production. The latter comprises two sections. The first discusses the current U.S. approach to pedagogy as inspired by French postmodernist Jean-François Lyotard, the notion of freedom, and the absurdities to which political correctness may lead. There follows a critique of Hardt and Negri’s poli-sci best seller *Empire*—an unavowed Bataillean fresco, which the official American press has endorsed enthusiastically.

Chapter 8 is devoted to the “postmodernism of the Right”: it opens with an exploration of Ernst Jünger, one of the most talented and controversial writers of the twentieth century. Jünger is here introduced as conservatism’s counterimage of Bataille. The deep likeness between the two, especially Jünger’s forerunning analysis of “disciplinarian power,” is evidence of this fascinating communion between Left and Right, a communion sealed by the shared belief that sacrifice, war, and violence (i.e., the necessity of the holocaust) are the ways of nature and, therefore, of man. Though poorly known to the American public, Jünger is a conspicuous figure that has exercised a strong influence upon Martin Heidegger. Heidegger’s mythology of the *Dasein* (the being-there) is but the German, parallel formulation of Bataille’s “core” (*le noyau*). This philosopher, who, like Jünger, had been associated with Nazism, is, in fact, a guiding light of postmodernism. He is revered on the Left, by Foucault and the French antihumanists, as well as on the Right. Among the conservative admirers of Heidegger, we find Alexandre Kojève, who taught Bataille, and whose “End of History” is a tenet of Right- and Left-wing postmodernism, and Leo Strauss, a late icon of Neoconservatism. Following a discussion of Jünger, Heidegger, and Kojève, this chapter goes to appraise in succession the writings of Strauss and his followers (in particular, Allan Bloom, Irving Kristol, and Francis Fukuyama), who have come to embody the rhetorical panoply of so-called Neoconservatism. This portion of the study aims to conjoin the two sides of this alarming ideology; we reiterate in this case the known thesis whereby this verbal confrontation opposing these Siamese halves of postmodernism is but a pretense—a pretense revealing the utter powerlessness and subservience of the Left, which, in fact, testifies by its stances

and by preventing alliances across divides that it has taken a back seat in the great vehicle of power, driven by the Right.

This conclusion is borne out by the analysis conducted in the final chapter (chapter 9), which scrutinizes the unmitigated failure of the so-called Left to fulfill its dissenting role in our times. This motley choir speaking in the name of “dissent” has indeed proved incapable of providing a truthful interpretation of international events, and thereby of articulating an incisive critique of the overwhelming injustices lately inflicted by the Western powers (and above all, the United States) on the civilian populations of the Near East, to take a poignant and most recent experience. It is my belief that the origins of the failure of the American Left are to be traced in the last true season of revolt, which the United States experienced after World War I when the regime crushed the Socialist movement. The firebrand who epitomized that season of dashed hopes was Thorstein Veblen, one of the West’s greatest thinkers. Veblen’s farewell analyses of the ills of contemporary business enterprise, and the remedies suggested to correct them, are here reproposed, in the hope that they might form a programmatic beginning for a renewed, rejuvenated movement of compassionate dissidence. Veblen’s testament is followed by a brief excursion into America’s and the West’s recent record of ideological dueling, from the shadowboxing of the Cold War to the antiwar agitation and the dissolution of the latter into the multicultural, State-assisted, bailout.

Even on the rubric of the West’s tormented relation with the Near East, Foucault paved the way for the Left’s drift toward critical inanity. In a series of articles he penned in 1979 for an Italian daily on the occasion of Khomeini’s “revolution,” Foucault interpreted the sudden and sonorous “Islamic” counter-attack as a pure instance of power resisting at the margins in open defiance to the disciplinarian defiance of the shah. He sided with the mullahs in the name of blood reprisal. Foucault’s imitator, Jean Baudrillard, did likewise in 1991, when he provocatively wrote in a set of widely distributed pieces that the Gulf War was the theatrical rendering of a collective subconscious process. This was a process by which our Western embarrassment, for having prodded Saddam into war in 1980 against the purity of Islam embodied by Khomeini’s Iran, demanded that we destroyed the proofs, and therefore that we liquidated Iraq’s little tyrant—something which could be effected only by means of a mock war. Baudrillard would hazard a similar metaphorical reading of 9/11, construing the latter as our secret, self-intoxicating desire to strike at our own Western hegemony by way of terrorism’s “viral” power. But, the establishment has clearly favored more conventional Foucauldian analyses, such as that of Hardt and Negri, that inscribe terrorism among the negative, rebellious repercussions of a general process of globalization, whose direction appears beyond the powers of any single authority—official or otherwise. This is the type of sophist speculation that is presently circulated in academia and that the media have alternatively promoted to digest all geopolitical consummations since 9/11. Not even the theorists of the old Left—the late survivors of the antiwar marches of the sixties—have been capable of offering interpretations of recent events that differ significantly from

the Foucauldian model. And, in the final analysis, it is readily seen that all such kindred explications from the realm of “dissent” are indeed analogous to the government’s official account, as stated in the *9-11 Report*. It thus appears that postmodernism and segments of the old Left have managed to reach an intellectual compromise with the hawks of the U.S. administration over the War on Terror by acknowledging the inevitability of globalization and the Foucauldian fictions of Al-Qaeda’s “loose networks of decentered power” and Bin Laden’s “symbolic resistance.”

CHAPTER 1

Introductory: A Genealogy of Postmodernism

To trail the genealogies of these high mortal miseries, carries us at last among the sourceless primogenitures of the gods; so that, in the face of all the glad, hay-making suns, and soft-cymballing round harvest-moons, we must needs give in to this: that the gods themselves are not for ever glad. The ineffaceable, sad birthmark in the brow of man, is but the stamp of sorrow in the signers.

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*¹

At first one thought that political correctness (PC) was but an absurd, and hopefully ephemeral, travesty: a collection of kitsch euphemisms patched together in order to cover, in the manner of fig leaves, the obscenities of contemporary America: her barbarism and racism. We know the story: Mrs. and Miss turned into Ms., gal became lady, colored people minorities, guy gentleman, blacks African-Americans, fat heavy (or big), Spics Latinos (or Hispanic-Americans), skinny slender, Wops Italian-Americans, Third World countries developing countries, Orientals Asians, short petite, et cetera. This was yet the folk aspect of the change. Initially—in the early eighties—all this sounded ludicrous, but one might have granted the benefit of the doubt to the whole effort and inferred therefrom that PC was but the expression of a movement that sought, in spite of all, to correct the errors and hatreds of the past by starting with the words themselves, with *speech*. Soon it became clear that the shift was never meant to go further. It was rhetoric all right; some kind of manneristic foreplay to the habitual doublespeak of the “Liberal democracies,” which, in their ploys of international conquest and social imbalances, always come to justify imperial intrigue in the name of “freedom” and “human rights” on the one hand, and to blame economic inequality on “culture,” on the other.

So PC turned out to be an argot that the middle class developed to mask its failure. Its failure to democratize the country; to overcome its deep-seated

loathing of all those ethnic groups that have shown themselves “unfit” in point of technological and business proficiency; to tolerate the sight of misery and distress with a view to allaying them; and to alleviate indigence . . . In short, as they were incapable of “spreading the sunshine,” and as they were despairing because of this failure, the intelligentsia and the people thought it was better to lie to themselves chronically, and so, like hackers, they cheated; they broke into the network of daily parlance and altered the data, they doctored the words. Words whose outspoken brutality was itself the suggestion of where the problems had to be tackled.

But there was no afterthought; in time, things evolved. Not only had ordinary language become falsified, and the intellectual possibility of *dissent* enfeebled as a consequence, but one came to find that this semi-improvised linguistic patch-work had gradually assumed the proportions of a *system*. In schools it became fashionable to hear that “truth” was an elusive concept, and therefore that the notion of “immutable values,” by which one might rank *human* achievements (and crimes), was not only wrong but heinous to boot, given its implicit injunction to discriminate, subjugate, and eventually destroy all that had been classified as “inferior.” According to this sprouting creed, the culprit of all that was abominable was the middle-aged white male of European descent: admittedly the greatest classifier and butcher in the history of mankind. This was hardly a new or controversial conclusion; what was different, however, was the peculiar logic leading to it.

So-called truths, one heard, formed just a tangle of *discourses*—discourses ever changing, the one hardly “truer” than the other, all of them manifestations of evolving *power* relations. This sounded suspiciously similar to a Marxian argument, but it wasn’t, for, listening on, one discovered that the human expression of reality as a whole was but a fabric of discourses, some (the dominant ones) more preponderant, others (the marginalized ones) less so. The novelty was that whole new categories of “displaced subjects”—the oppressed ones—were now launched on the field of analysis and endowed with discourses of their own, which, as it was forcefully conveyed, happened to be no less (if not a great deal more) noble, legitimate, and truthful than the discourse of the Eurocentric whites.

At first sight this appeared to be a compassionate move to give a voice to all the formerly silent victims of torture and abuse—the “soft targets” of Western oppression: colonized peoples, the poor, the weak, women, children, and homosexuals. Yet again, looking more closely, it was nothing of the sort. This new philosophical “system” implied no resolution, no synthesis, no expectation of salvation, no promise of a struggle in the name of unity—aspects that, for instance, Christianity and Marxism did share to a certain extent. Because it didn’t really promise a way out of the suffering, the new “discourse” seemed to abandon the world to its own confusion and insolvency. The best one could do, so went the advice, was to resist stubbornly the established powers of oppression and attempt to subvert them always by joining nuclei of guerrilla warfare, which maneuvered from the *margins* of society.

In brief, what was being offered was a shorthand gospel of intellectual disobedience in the name of a sentimental connivance with the downtrodden of the world. In fact, as we shall see, the true nature of this new intellectual fad was far more complex than what might have been gathered from this collection of impressions, but all in all, a sneering relativism and the profession of parlor radicalism were the immediate traits that transpired from a first casual encounter with it.

American academia in the eighties was at the forefront of this transformation. Notwithstanding its poses and sentimental outbursts, seldom, if ever, is the academic corps a disobedient lot. Among American educators, as the issue was one of “resistance,” what this new trend thus translated into, practically, was a mischievous pantomime of antagonisms. In other words, the “new dissenters”—who, exactly as their predecessors (the Marxists of yesteryear), never acted outside or against the system but always *within* it—resolved to play a game in which each entrenched himself or herself in the nominal dugout of “tolerance.” From that position, they proceeded to analyze all “cultural artifacts” (the “great books,” films, scholarly and media articles, etc.) and tear them apart—“deconstruct” was the proper expression—with a (more or less overt) view to lashing out at a number of choice targets, which were always the same for all (we will come to these shortly). The beauty of it all was that, through this game, one got to disintegrate much and construct nothing; and no systematic alliances across the dugout were possible for these would have meant one step toward *unity*, which, as a “totalizing discourse”—as a “universal”—was, for the “new dissenters,” the ultimate taboo. In truth, the “deconstructivists” came to form an alliance of sorts: a loose but nevertheless strong and resilient alliance against anyone seeking unity across the political spectrum in the name of justice. Phrased differently, the “new culture of resistance” stood for an alliance against alliances.

The new trend took on the name of “postmodernism,” and its prophet was a white, thoroughly European male: Michel Foucault a darling of Western propaganda, whose decisive endorsement by the Parisian intelligentsia in 1966 and by its New York counterpart in 1975 transformed him instantly into an intellectual icon of the West. Foucault agreeably assumed the proffered role of guru, and in time came to be the leader of a veritable French invasion of America’s academia and educational institutions. An invasion which has consolidated itself twenty-five years later—at a time when, in Europe, the Foucauldian influence has been long dead—into a strong bastion of thought, wielding ever more money, converts, governmental leeway, publications, and power, power of the purest sort: intolerant and corrupt.

For lack of a better creed, and presumably disappointed by the utter failure of their country’s short-lived and scattered Socialist and hippie experiments in the recent past, waves of American intellectuals, educators, and publicists presently seem to have found sanctuary in the “rebel” construction of this late French, postmodernist school.

From philosophy to literary criticism, via sociology and governmentality, the contagion has recently reached economics. The picture that emerges from this

scramble is an odd one: among the lettered multitudes, we no longer see the “Left”: no coherent movement of dissent exists anymore—it is literally finished. Instead, the spectacle is one of affluent middle-class intellectuals, nearly all white males of European descent, that are divided into two factions: the Liberals (modernists) on one side, and the prankishly antagonizing postmodernists on the other. Under the cover of a politically correct truce signed in the name of propriety, the one faction (barely) tolerates the whims of the other, and while the modernists carry on business as usual, telling their pupils that life is a game of chance in which “the market” alone can take them to the top, the postmodernists reach conclusions not altogether dissimilar. Put another way, postmodernist professors invite their classes to apply relativistic exercises and “deconstructivist” techniques, whereby the students are made to take apart a narrative and identify the social prejudices informing the text; but after the deconstruction has crushed all the idols, the class has in fact no option but to fall back upon whatever is the current system of belief, that is, the creed of self-interest and faith in the “free-market” with which every Anglo-Saxon is raised.

Ten times out of ten the pupils are trained to take aim and fire at the privileged pet-peevs of postmodernism. These are: patriarchy, phallogracy, paternalism, racism, sexism, machismo, racist industrial pollution (that is, only that pollution that is putatively caused by the white elites and discharged on “minorities”), Europe, Eurocentrism, the white European male, the male in general, Columbus and the Catholics, religion, God, transcendence, metaphysics, the spirit, colonization and early imperialism, and sometimes, *ever more infrequently*, “capitalism,” preferably singled out as a vague synonym for economic oppression. *Never*, though, are the students made to visit the polemic upon the concrete working of the hierarchies of *real power*: say, to investigate the effective composition, functioning, and history of the political and financial establishments of the West.

The *social sciences* . . . suffer when fashionable nonsense and word games displace the critical and rigorous analysis of social realities. Postmodernism has three principal negative effects: a waste of time in the human sciences, a cultural confusion that favors obscurantism, and a weakening of the political left . . . No research [. . .] can progress on a basis that is both conceptually confused and radically detached from empirical evidence [. . .]. What is worse [. . .] is the adverse effect that abandoning clear thinking and clear writing has on teaching and culture. Students learn to repeat and to embellish discourses that they only barely understand. They can even, if they are lucky, make an academic career out of it by becoming expert in the manipulation of an erudite jargon.²

In the end, even though in the classroom “God” and patriarchy have come to be arraigned, tried, and sentenced a million times, our system, as a whole, as many critics (including various postmodernists) have understood, is never questioned. Moreover, it is widely remarked that the postmodern attitude, in its craving for differentiation, erasure of boundaries, and permissiveness, is indeed highly compatible with the defining traits of our corporate, market-oriented age.

This basic realization reveals that the apparent antagonism between modernists and postmodernists is somewhat feigned, if not imaginary.

So far, all this sounds like a sorry joke. But the fact remains that, since the advent of postmodernism, whatever was left of a dissenting mood has beaten a hasty retreat. And the impact of political correctness on the middle class' education system might have something to do with this. Twenty-plus years of disintegrative labor in the schools have eventually managed to discipline American pupils, conditioning them to snarl, snap and bite whenever they sniff anything redolent of "sexism," "absolutism," "Eurocentrism," or "white male chauvinism." They have been disciplined by means of a politically correct lack of any spiritual certainty, other than a patriotic feeling of righteousness, a feeling shared and reinforced on the other hand by the pupils' Liberal education—the other pedagogical half of America. Joining the postmodern half to the Liberal half, and taking the limit of our argumentation, thus assuming that in time all empathy will be wrested from the hearts of young Americans, we obtain this hypothetical, neotype "American citizen": a fanaticized hybrid who, as a creature of Liberalism, decomposes life in costs and benefits, considers compassion an (expensive and unnecessary) option, and is convinced of his/her intellectual and cultural superiority vis-à-vis all those peoples incapable of mastering the technological arts or the savvy ways of commerce. As a creature of postmodernism, however, the "new western type" will not always dare to confess openly the conviction of being culturally superior. He or she is ever the hypocrite. But, with regard to postmodernism, the interesting development in this case is that, since strongly religious peoples have been historically deaf to the merits of machine-making and of technology,³ the Liberal scientific pride and the postmodernist aversion to traditional religion will reinforce each other and bring "the citizen's" mind to an impasse. Either rationality prevails and the individual's vision turns into the most intolerant form of hawkish mindset—for example, we may think of today's *Liberal* supporters of the "war on terror" (i.e., the war against the Arab people as a whole—see chapter 9)—or postmodernism's open-ended philosophy of denial predominates and the individual flounders in irresolute apathy, not knowing what to do. To this difficulty the so-called Neoconservative variant presents a fascinating solution: what the new Republican Right has studiously attempted since the mid-nineties is precisely this fusion of civic, devout ardor—Christ wrapped in the flag, or the flag tout court—with the Liberal faith: supply-side economics plus technology. This model, conceived and orchestrated with patience and method by these intriguing "postmodernists of the Right" (e.g., Leo Strauss, Irving Kristol, Francis Fukuyama, and others), though much derided at its inception by rival Democrats, has, instead, displayed tremendous efficacy in the face of the exigencies of the times. This "Neoconservative" palliative presently appears to be working better than anything the Liberals had thought of in our era of post-Cold War, "global," "multipolar" competition.

Most importantly, recent scholarly analyses of Neoconservativism have revealed the existence of an undeniable philosophical affinity between these postmodernists of the Right and their counterparts on the Left;⁴ this connection

will be examined in chapter 8. Both parties believe that ours is a world ultimately driven by chance, which only power (i.e., violence) can subdue. Yet the conservative elitists keep this truth occult and recommend, for the sake of social stability, the espousal of “traditional values” and economic oligarchism, whereas the Foucauldian postmodernists of the Left personify, more or less aggressively, the other half of the game, namely, the unstable and chaotic drift of life upon whose taming the conservatives assert their political tenure. By retreating “to the margins of cultural difference” and posing behind a stance of merely verbal harassment aimed at, say, phalloglory or televangelism, the Foucauldians do in fact renounce to antagonize, in a united front, the powers that be. Superficially, what seems most contradictory of these Foucauldians is their use of reason to humiliate reason, and of rational language (what they refer to as “discourse”) to celebrate chaos: more than a contradiction, this is “cheating” (*une tricherie*), as Georges Bataille himself admitted. “The realm of thought,” he said, “is horror. Yes, it is horror itself [. . .]. It is like slipping in the night, on the pitch of a roof, with no parapet and in a wind that nothing appeases. The more thought is rigorous, the more the menace intensifies.”⁵ So, what has been truly at work in this strange debate? What have been the stakes?

Several issues are at stake here: the state of education in America, the paralysis of the critical faculty of students, the death of dissent, and the political orientation of the American intelligentsia. These are all related themes, and one of the linking threads is indeed this exceptional adaptation of French antihumanism within America’s network of knowledge. The focus of this study will be to investigate the origins and nature of this peculiar philosophical import from France. Borrowing Foucault’s phraseology, we propose to conduct an archeology of Foucault himself and map out a genealogy of his spiritual provenance. Who is Foucault and where does he come from?

Foucault owed his American success to having developed a product that happened to satisfy a critical exigency faced by the U.S. elites in managing country and propaganda: namely, that of preventing the formation of a compact movement of political dissent united by a universal belief in justice. Academics, too, had reasons for jumping on the bandwagon and taking up the vogue from France: (1) it offered a way out of the contradictory imperative of Marxian class conscience: with Foucault, the educated bourgeois with romantic aspirations could side with and speak for the poor, the madmen and convicts without having to be one of them—this was liberating; and (2) Foucault wrote at length, often passionately, in defense of the oppressed who suffered disfiguring abuse in asylums, prisons, and hospitals; he spoke in defense of a primordial vitality, systematically crushed by disciplinary powers, whose mystique he most originally depicted; and he pleaded without affecting the sanctimonious style of all those optimistic bores who could never conclude a treatise on human struggle and iniquity without appealing to the powers of divine providence. In a word Foucault was “it”: sophisticated, talented, deep, feisty, creative, politically engaged, seemingly compassionate, but sporting enough iconoclasm and irreverence to keep the whole deal “cool.”

And so he became a new star of the (already bankrupt) American Left. But there appeared to be a serious misunderstanding behind it all.

During the 1980s, a number of Americans working in a university setting enshrined Foucault as a kind of patron saint, a canonic figure whose authority they routinely invoked in order to legitimate, in properly academic terms, their own brand of “progressive” politics. Most of the latter-day Foucauldians are high-minded democrats; they are committed to forging a more diverse society in which whites and people of color, straights and gays, men and women, their various and ethnic and gender “differences” intact, can nevertheless all live in compassionate harmony—an appealing, if difficult goal, with deep roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition. *Unfortunately*, Foucault’s lifework is far more unconventional—and far more discomfiting—than some of his “progressive” admirers are ready to admit. [. . .]. Foucault issued a basic challenge to nearly everything that passes for “right” in Western culture—including everything that passes for “right” among a great many of America’s left-wing academics.⁶

These lines, penned by a Foucauldian academic, go straight to the heart of the matter. “Unfortunately,” he wrote: as if he were regretfully informing his “high-minded, Democrat” colleagues that they have all been the victims of a frightening misjudgment, if not a dupery. Still driven by the precepts of their “Judeo-Christian” formation, but pressured by the mechanical pace, the uncertainty, and the disillusion of the times, the “progressives” appear to have satisfactorily bartered their traditional, leftist slogans for the newer lingo of Foucault. They merely thought that they had “upgraded”: still compassionate after all these years, yet “hip.” However, and here is the trouble, the Foucauldian discourse, as the passage above correctly warned, has nothing to do with compassion. Foucault never cared for the conservation of life, but rather the opposite: if anything, he enjoined to cultivate *suicide* throughout one’s life. His empathy for the troubled lunatics and convicts of the carceral institutes was a form of complicity with all those creatures of uninhibited, violent yearning; a camaraderie felt toward all manifestations of savage insubordination before any form of authority, be it transcendent or mechanically immanent (like the taxonomic frenzy of the modern era). The proximate enemy of postmodernism appears to be technocratic oppression and surveillance—symbolized by the clean-shaven, monitoring engineer in a white robe—but the ultimate target is unmistakably the belief in “the good.” Foucault’s is a testimony to reasoned despair, which strives to oppose compassionate sentiment, and which takes no pains to reform the world’s iniquities for the sake of peace.

As said, the Foucauldians have no political agenda, no program, and no plans for reform. Foucault’s idea of resistance was merely to join the forces of resentment that simmer in the lower depths of society (“at the margins,” as he put it), and engage in an endless tug-of-war with the constituted authorities. The invitation to *transgress* appeared to have been an end in itself: it managed to keep social tension always at boiling temperature. And, needless to add, the party profiting the most from such a state of perennial strife is “disciplinarian power” itself—the enemy.

One could have then inferred from his peculiar brand of “heresy” that Foucault was some sort of modern-day *Gnostic*, that is, a contemporary edition of those teachers of antiquity who couched in rational prose ideas, parables, and myths antithetical to the orthodox dogmas of the Fathers of the Church. Teachers who accordingly preconized behaviors and lifestyles that the Fathers censured as disreputable and immoral. As a neo-Gnostic, Foucault’s induction into American academia might be seen as something of a sensation; one of those bizarre twists in the history of ideas that do not occur infrequently, but that do not generally last more than a few seasons. At this time, however, Foucault is still going strong, and his academic popularity in the United States shows no signs of abatement. And, for a fad, even if French, a quarter of a century is a long time.

In truth, this phenomenon is the conspicuous symptom of a crisis. A crisis so profound that clever minds, such as American academics claim to have in abundance, have mistaken a priest of dissolution (Foucault) for an apostle of compassion and taken in his whole retinue (other French *maitres à penser* such as Lyotard or Baudrillard, whom we will discuss later), no questions asked. Those questions should have been asked, for the sake of clarity. Because, if they had been, they would have revealed that Foucault is not as original as the voice of U.S. academe purports him to be. By tracing the sources of his discourse, one discovers that Foucault had merely re-elaborated themes that had been developed by another thinker. Not some vague magus of Gnostic memory, but the true inspirer of the postmodern mood: Bataille, the *poète maudit* of contemporary French thought. Foucault borrowed the near entirety of his neologisms, metaphors, allegories, and philosophical constructions from Bataille, *wholesale*. And like all ambitious, and accordingly ungrateful, pupils, Foucault gave only sparse thanks to the master, quoting him duly and admiringly (whenever the master’s shadow could not be avoided altogether), but as seldom as possible. Exponents of the Frankfurt School, who attended a series of seminars chaired by Bataille in Paris the late thirties, were quick to point to the *obvious* legacy connecting Foucault to the semiforgotten Bataille,⁷ but, as it usually happens in the history of modern thought, the mold of a successful creed of subversion is much too revelatory and is thus better left in wraps. And so it went: Bataille, like a Leninist grande at the time of the Stalinist purges, was effaced from the official photographs; thenceforth his name made only brief appearances in the indices of postmodern texts, and his vast opus (translated into English only in part) has been entrusted to the care of a handful of purist custodians. Custodians, whose chief duty, of course, has been to issue continual disclaimers highlighting how starkly different in point of style and goals the two men—Bataille and Foucault—truly were. Which is false.

Bataille had conceived his opus in the form of “a project” (*le projet*) whose crudity and extremism, however, prevented it from gaining diffuse acceptance in the Liberal mainstream. The Bataillean enterprise was driven by the unhinged ambition to convert others to a placid acceptance of violence and dissipation by employing a mix of persuasive rational arguments on the impossibility of grasping the meaning of the Hereafter, and by teaching the rudiments of a language

of his making, which was built upon imagery inspired by death and bloody sacrifice.

Should I speculate gravely about freedom, or about God? We know nothing of it, and if we do speak of it, it is by way of play (*c'est un jeu*). Everything that goes further than common truth is play.⁸

It seemed as though Bataille had wanted to infiltrate conventional language and thought (which he subsumed under the rubric of “discourse”) and, through these, reach the collective mind of bourgeois society with the purpose of bending, confusing, and re-directing it. Thus, he looked forward to dissolving within the thinking individual all expectation of justice after death, of karma. More specifically, the “project” consisted of making “*violence*,” which is *silent* (i.e., whose experience is inexpressible), a spoken word, in the *hope* of subverting all preconceptions traditionally accepted as “sacred,” such as peace, compassion, gifting, and harmony. The final objective being that of disabusing the potential convert by reconciling him or her to the spontaneous brutality of life and nature. Finally, Bataille’s social dream was to see men, after they have undergone this kind of *initiation*, create communities that would celebrate the mystery of collective life much in the fashion of the ancient orgiastic cults, which fascinated him so deeply. The new sacred imperative was to violate every prohibition, to *transgress* every taboo and sacred commandment: especially the belief in the “benevolent, all-seeing God,” which, in revenge, he turned on its head by transforming it into a worship of base matter. His new creed came to be symbolized by a headless monster: the Bataillean icon of a deified Nothingness; he christened it “*l’Acéphale*.⁹”

Bataille’s starting point was the critique of modern bureaucratized society whose subversion he wished to employ for a clearing through customs, as it were, of ancient bloody cults, such as those of Kali or the Aztec divinities. He was the first contemporary thinker who systematically tackled the essentially religious challenge of recycling, within a modern, rationalist framework, old infernal forms of worship with the avowed intent of numbing within the individual the yearning for transcendence—of annihilating in humans the wish that there be retribution after this life. But “the project” never took off. In itself, the legacy of Bataille—an eclectic and unique collection of gritty pornography, surrealist poems, philosophical aestheticism, iconoclastic mysticism, bold theology, genial sociology, and dazzling political economy, all of which were composed in the key of death, tumescence, and bloody effusion—was far too pictorial, uneven, and cruelly sincere to have succeeded in perverting the modern middle class as its author had wished. What with the oneiric prose and, as we shall see, all that evocation of obscene monsters, dreary epiphanies, purulent vaginas, and not-so-ambivalent tracts on the merits of fascism, “the project,” in such a raw state, was not likely to convince the skeptical West, which had long since stopped believing in angels and demons. And this is the reason why Foucault came to acquire enormous relevance in this movement: he purged the Bataillean project of the

mystical and esoteric fancies and gave it discursive respectability by shaping it into a compact system of thought, a pseudophilosophy that was built upon a simple contraposition. The contraposition of a preexisting core of rebellious, primordial lifeblood (embodied by Foucault's well-known lunatics of the asylum), prowled and hunted by the aseptic, rational rigor of the machine era (the technocratic managers of the clinics, penitentiaries, and madhouses). This imaginative Bataillean metaphor of contemporary life struggle in the modern era Foucault would immortalize in his celebrated "theory" of Power/Knowledge. Finally, the American Foucauldians adopted this myth to articulate the racial/gender divide along which blacks allegedly part from whites, and women from men, until each party rejoins its own isle of indigenous knowledge, pledging to resist "at the margins" and to let the mutual hostility fester with no chance of reconciliation. Thus, with uncommon disingenuousness, feminism, homosexuality, and nonwhite ethnicity have been granted by the white establishment peer status in the grand arena of public discourse—through, for example, proclamations, exclusivist legislation such as Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action, and ad hoc academic departments. And from this kind of promotion to describing the post-9/11 rampage in Afghanistan as a "feminist war of liberation" there could only have been a short step. So ours is the story of a system of power, which, finding itself ever more under the grip of war-loving oligarchs that have brought intoxicating propaganda to new heights of virtuosity, resolved thirty years ago to promote openly the postmodern politics of diversity with the manifest intent of blocking any form of dissent and opposition. This politics of diversity is an academic treatment of Foucault's Power/Knowledge, which is itself, a systematic re-elaboration of a creed of sorts invented by Bataille in the prewar era. So we now turn to the antitraditional roots of the Bataillean vision.

CHAPTER 2

The Great Goddess and Dionysus

TEIRESIAS: There are two powers [. . .] which are supreme. In human affairs: first Demeter—the same goddess is also Earth; give her which name you please—and she supplies mankind with solid food. After her came Dionysus, Semele's son; the blessing he procured and gave men is counterpart to that of bread: the clear juice of the grape.

Euripides, *The Bacchae*¹

One of the main theses of this book is that the Bataillean-Foucauldian discourse may be interpreted as a transliteration of *religious* feeling—*religious* feeling of a special kind. As known, religion, from the Latin *religare* (to unite),² is the professed practice of communing with “the supernatural Other,” the nonhuman element that is perceived to be looming beyond the illusion of materiality. Thus, a religious understanding of life yields two realms of action: *the sacred and the profane*. The sacred is that sphere of life in which men consummate their “union with the gods,” and beyond the limits of this holy locus begins the realm of the profane, from the Latin *pro fano* (“out of the temple”). Thereby, men have established the sacredness of space (venue of prayer), of time (ritual festivities), of bodily conduct (demeanor and meditative care of the body), and of thought (the Word of the Books). For the religious man, everything outside the religious circle is nonsensical, contingent, unhallowed, meaningless, and, ultimately, “unreal.”³ For the religious man, the world, as he finds it, is a barren field that he must enclose, till, and ward under the watch of his divinity of *election*, because—and here the difficulties begin—there have since time immemorial appeared to be more than a few gods from which to choose; more than a few gods beckoning to the religious individual. Today, the conventional acceptation of “religion” is that of a unitary credo under the austere dispensation of a single, commanding, supernatural Lord: the traditional monotheistic confessions, in brief. Everything else, it follows, is profanity.

This is a misleading conception, however, which has doubtless been encouraged by the organized Churches to divert their respective communities from any

concrete idolatrous temptation. To establish themselves, traditional cults have fought long and hard against “rival divinities,” which they have eventually banished as “devilish idols.” When they appeared to have won the match, all “evil” disposition was subsumed under the convenient, single head of the Adversary (Satan), who was cast out of heaven and made thereby the prince of *profane* darkness.

This is the traditional account that Bataille challenged most decisively, and his critique would mark the point of departure for the creation of his “acephalic cult.” He would claim, aided and supported by solid evidence—scholarly and literary—that practices referred to as “evil” by the Churches were, once upon a time, *sacred* themselves. That is, no less sacred, and religious, than those pertaining to, say, Jehovah or Christ, but of a different, *opposed* polarity. Though “evil gods” and their practices might have been stamped out of collective behavior and erased from the sacred narrative, Bataille reminded us that these orgiastic deities have never ceased throughout the centuries to manifest themselves—in their purity, all the more bloodily and intensely—even as the monotheistic Churches have tirelessly striven to keep them at bay.

And this claim is indisputable. There was indeed a time, before the “God from the desert” (Jehovah) made a comeback, when sacredness was of another nature. According to a common myth, the world was originally created during a Golden Age by a celestial supreme being, who eventually came to lose religious currency. Though he wasn’t entirely forgotten, he lost his preeminent place in the cults and drew “farther and farther away from until he became an idle god” (*deus otiosus*).⁴ Into the void he left behind crept other types of divinities, who imposed their other ways. Divinities such as goddesses, who inspired the great Southern-Asiatic matriarchal cults of the megalithic period.⁵

When we compare femininity with virility in material terms such as physical strength, harshness and violent affirmation, it is only natural that the woman, owing to her characteristics of sensitivity, self-sacrifice, and love—not to mention the mystery of procreation—was regarded as the representative of a higher principle; she was even able to acquire authority and to appear as an image of the universal Mother. *Thus it is not a contradiction that in some instances, spiritual and even social gynaecocracy did not appear in effeminate but in violent and bellicose societies.*⁶

The mythopoiesis of gynaecocracy spoke of goddesses as mothers who generated without the help of male gods. This was an expression “of the self-sufficiency and fecundity of Mother Earth. Such mythical conceptions [had] their counterparts in beliefs concerning the spontaneous fecundity of woman and in her occult magico-religious powers, which exert a determining influence on plant life.”⁷ In the early period of culture, tillage, cattle-breeding, and the parental bent “worked together to bring the women into the chief place in the technological scheme”; the mother-goddess bequeathed upon men “a peaceable culture” sustained by the gift of agriculture.⁸ This sort of civilization is properly designated as *chthonic*, that is, “subterranean”—of the earth—given its

sacred emphasis on the powers of generation, which germinate from the underground womb.

Generally speaking, it is possible to establish a relationship between the feminine spirituality and pantheism, according to which ultimate reality is conceived as a great sea into which the nucleus of an individual merges and becomes dissolved like a grain of salt. *In pantheism, personality is an illusory and temporary manifestation of the one undifferentiated substance, which is simultaneously nature as well as the only reality; in the Weltanschauung there is no room for any transcendent order.*⁹

The peaceable manifestation of matriarchy has also come under the name of "Demetrianism," after the mother-goddess of fertility, Demeter. In general, during, matriarchal-chthonic festivities, "all men felt themselves to be free and equal; caste and class distinction no longer applied, and could be freely overturned; and a general licentiousness and pleasure in promiscuity tended to be rather widespread."¹⁰ The Great Mother appeared to have been the tutelary divinity of the Silver Age, until degenerate variants made their disconcerting ingress into the mythological record. New cults began to make peculiar demands of their faithful: "Head hunting, human sacrifices, cannibalism were all accepted by man to ensure the life of plants. [. . .] For the vegetable world to continue, man must kill and be killed; in addition, he must assume sexuality to its extreme limit—the orgy."¹¹ This was no play of lust and no moral perversion in the petty modern sense. Sacrifice is literally "the making of things sacred" (from the Latin *sacrum facio*), and the devotees of chthonic, bloody-orgiastic cults took most seriously the performance of such violent paroxysms as these, by all accounts, permitted them to commune religiously with those entities requesting the bloodshed (the holocaust) and to ensure the propagation of human and vegetable life. These religious excesses were given sacred vent under two specular degenerate (and rebellious) mutations respectively of the "orthodox" male and female cults—that is, the (male) celestial being of the Golden Age and the Mother of the Silver Age. The two bloody offshoots were the Aphrodisitic and Dionysian civilizations.

The celebration of the Great Goddess in its violent guise, whereby the mother gives way to the *hetaera* (the whore)—took place during special sacred festivals (saturnalia, Sacchean feasts, Cybele's Mysteries, etc.), which entailed a variety of liturgies. To name but the most notorious: the slaying of a person representing the male regal figure, whom the Great Goddess had loved only for pleasure and not for procreation;¹² self-castration on the part of priests, who, possessed by the Goddess, sought to transform themselves into the feminine type (e.g., the famous myth of the shepherd Attis, who emasculated himself in a Dionysian trance); and the inversion of sex, whereby (1) statues of the goddesses would display masculine features, and (2) men in the Mysteries would adorn themselves with the clothes of women and women with those of men—all signs that the virile element had "come to be looked down upon as irrelevant," "as a source of embarrassment."¹³

Dionysism is the male version of the Aphrodisitic deviation. Dionysus, the god of the bacchanalia, drunkenness, abandon, orgiastic furor, musical rapture, and poetic explosion—young Nietzsche's favorite—is also the personification of erotic power, admittedly one of man's, but above all woman's,¹⁴ most fascinating sources of entralling energy.

In Dionysism, Eros becomes “sacred frenzy,” mystic orgasm: it is the highest possibility inherent in this direction and it is aimed at undoing the bonds of matter and at producing a transfiguration through frenzy, excess and ecstasis . . . Dionysus was also represented as a demon of the infernal regions, and was often associated with the principle of *water* . . . The ecstatic and pantheistic orientation associated with the sexual element, predominates in the Mystery of the “sacred orgy”; frenzied contacts with the occult forces of the earth and maenadic and pandemic liberations occur in a domain that is simultaneously that of unrestrained sex, night and death.¹⁵

But then, somewhat abruptly, unaccounted migratory patterns, featuring hordes of male-gods-worshipping warriors began to alter the religious map of the West. The Hellenic (Achaean, Ionian, and Dorian) invasions of Greece and Asia Minor early in the second millennium B.C. effected, in fact, a religious “redress”: this “redress” caused by the new invasions also signified a direct attack upon the matriarchal triad (of the Goddess in the form of maiden-mother-crone) by the knights of the north to restore the virile cult of the Golden Age. The Achaean and Ionian inroads into the preexistent southern gynaecocratic civilization led to an amalgam between the Aryan worship of the invaders and the local Goddess, who came to accept them as children and providers of sacred kings. “Thus a male military aristocracy became reconciled to female theocracy”: Zeus took Hera, the shrew-Goddess, as his (recalcitrant) wife. “All early myths about the gods' seduction of nymphs refer apparently to marriages between Hellenic chieftains and local moon-priestesses; bitterly opposed by Hera, which means by conservative religious feeling.” A most revealing myth in this connection is Apollo's “rape” of Daphne. Contrary to the conventional interpretation, “Daphne was anything but a frightened virgin: her name was the contraption of *Daphoene*, ‘the bloody one,’ the goddess in orgiastic mood, whose priestesses, the maenads, chewed laurel-leaves¹⁶ [which contained cyanide of potassium] as an intoxicant and periodically rushed out at full moon, assaulted unwary travelers, and tore children or young animals into pieces.”¹⁷ To prevent Apollo from subduing Daphoene, Hera metamorphosed her into a tree. Rather than a sympathetic intervention in favor of “the bloody one,” the transformation symbolized opposition to the restoration of patriarchy. Thus, myth confirms that the Goddess herself was an *intolerant* dispenser of vehement *prohibition*.

As Robert Graves narrated in his *Greek Myths*, “when the Dorians arrived, towards the close of the second millennium,” matriarchy, already weakened, gave way to the institution of patrilineal succession. Hence the pantheon came to be governed by the Olympian family ruled by Zeus, and Hera had to submit unconditionally. However, because “the goddesses, though left in a minority,

were never altogether ousted—as they were in Jerusalem—,” ancient Greek culture ended up representing a compromise of sorts between masculine and feminine sacredness.¹⁸ Significant traces of this somewhat uncomfortable cohabitation may be found in ancient Greece’s most accomplished Utopian synthesis: Plato’s *Laws*. Plato is squarely in the Apollinian camp, yet in the hierarchy he concedes to the “gods of the underworld” (*oi chthónioi*), grudgingly and in passing, a reverential awe that is their due, as well as a special month—the twelfth, Pluto’s (Hades, king-god of the nether world)—for their festivals.¹⁹ The fate of the mythical king Pentheus, whose tragic end Euripides immortalized in *The Bacchae*, was not lost on the school of Athens: because the Theban monarch refused to acknowledge Dionysus’s divinity, he was torn asunder by his own mother, Agauë, a priestess-maenad, in the course of an orgiastic delirium inspired by the god of revelry.

Agauë: Dionysus has destroyed us. Now I understand.

Cadmus (her father): He was insulted.²⁰

Under Plato’s *Laws*, no excesses are to be encouraged, but Dionysian power—of drink, music, and dance—if *tamed*, may be used for the glory of Apollo: a circumspect allowance, under the alert eye of Zeus, the One. In sum, the One had married Demeter, disciplined Dionysus, and chained bloody Daphne in the cellar.

In his celebrous *The Golden Bough*—a monumental compilation of ethnography and myth revolving round the lurking persistence of ancient matriarchal and Dionysian worship in the era of patriarchy—Sir James Frazer of Trinity College, said without saying, as Robert Graves phrased it, “that Christian legend, dogma and ritual are the refinement of a great body of primitive and even barbarous beliefs, and that almost the only original element on Christianity is the personality of Jesus.”²¹ Indeed, Frazer acknowledged that at Rome and Athens, male kinship was preceded by female kinship. And in his lengthy and colorful exploration of the social practices of the ancient matriarchies, he dwelt on the centrality of *the sacrifice of the man-god*, that is, on the ritual and periodic slaying of a divine king in his prime. This was done to ensure that the youthful vitality of the king would be captured and suffused throughout the observant community, preventing it thus from suffering weakness and decay. This tradition was clearly pervaded by the belief that the king was responsible for the weather and the crops, and that he might “justly pay with his life for the inclemency of the one and the failure of the other, as a ransom offered to the avenging demons.”²² In time, kings bent on retaining the privilege to rule, which they acquired by marrying into matrilineal dynasties, would devolve the sacrificial duty upon *their own son*, for no one “could so appropriately die for the king and, through him, for the whole people, as the king’s son.”²³ “If there were not a symbolic dismemberment there could never be reintegration of the old parts, and there could be no new life pattern to replace the old one grown anemic *by feeding only upon goodness.*”²⁴

Under the name Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis and Attis, the peoples of Egypt and Western Asia represented the yearly decay and revival of life, especially vegetable life, which they personified as god who annually dies and rose again from the dead.²⁵

It thus appears that in pre-orthodox mythology, man-god is *cloven*, torn, unfinished: in myth he is split into two halves, a “Spirit of the Waxing Year” (e.g., Osiris), and a “Spirit of the Waning Year” (e.g., Set). Both halves compete for the love of the mother-goddess, who, unlike man-god, is allegedly *a complete, whole divinity*. “She can keep her feet always in the same place, whether in the sky, in the underworld or on this earth.”²⁶

She tries to satisfy both [Osiris and Set], but can only do so by alternate murder, and man tries to regard this as evidence of her falsity, not of his own irreconcilable demands on her.²⁷

The Great Mother is Kali, the Indian goddess of *both* birth and destruction, mother, lover, and reaper, who unites “within her being opposing qualities, virginal and whorish, maternal and destructive.”²⁸ She is the White Goddess, “the Mother of all living, the ancient power of fright and lust,” “both lovely and cruel, ugly and kind.”²⁹ “As Nut she is the dark, star-studded night sky, circling over the earth, forming with her hands and feet the gateways to life and death.”³⁰ Of her several embodiments, it is the destructive whore, as will be seen, that would attract Georges Bataille (and Ernst Jünger) the most. Before marriage, in communities where the goddess held sway as Aphrodite or Astarte, “all women were obliged by custom to prostitute themselves to strangers at her sanctuary, and dedicate to her the wages earned by this sanctified harlotry.”³¹ “Marriage [was] considered hateful to the White Goddess.”³² The archetype of the “whore as Goddess” would indeed give life to some of the most vivid personages of Bataille’s narrative (e.g., *Madame Edwarda*) and of his political economy (*The Accursed Share*), which is based on the notions of squander and dissipation—that is, erotic energy not aimed at procreation.³³

The Goddess, as lover and mother, presided over the “alternate” murder and resurrection of the man-god.

The cruel, capricious, incontinent White Goddess and the mild, steadfast, chaste virgin are not to be reconciled except in the nativity context.³⁴

The sacred dramas staged in her honor reenacted, as in our modern mass, the sacrificial death and rebirth of the male-hero. As Attis, the heroic man-god was said to be born of a virgin, miraculously. As Dionysus, instead, myth recounts that he occupied his father’s, Zeus’s, throne, and eventually suffered death by dismemberment at the hands of his enemies, the Titans, in the form of a *bull*, which thence came to be worshipped by the religious collective as the most sacred of animals. To Frazer, all such stories are the mythological expression of

the ceremonial sacrifice of divine kings in matriarchal regimes.³⁵ A remarkable manifestation in these civilizations' divine bestiaries, especially for its ambivalent significance, is the *pig*. Seen by many as unclean, the swine was yet untouchable, and this, some thought, was the mark its sacredness.

This difference of opinion points to a hazy state of religious thought in *which the idea of sanctity and uncleanness are not yet sharply distinguished*, both being blent in a sort of vaporous solution to which we give the notion of taboo.³⁶

Bataille studied Frazer's research attentively. "It is difficult to doubt," Bataille reflected thereafter, "that the passion and resurrection of Jesus are not the extension of sentiments related to the ancient legends of divinities put to death."³⁷ With the elements he drew from *The Golden Bough*, Bataille would attempt to assemble a synthesis of religious feeling in the modern era—a theological construction that could solve the eternal conundrum of theodicy: that is, the disquieting presence of reasoned perfidy in a cosmos seemingly ruled by harmonious laws. From the *Golden Bough*, Bataille retained the pattern of a sacrificed god-king, his mutilation and rebirth, the divine effigies of the bull and pig, and the intimation that sacredness, like Kali, might have two faces—a clean countenance and a foul underside. Both polarities being independent of each other, and divided only by the barrier of the taboo, which is periodically broken in the romps of the saturnalia (and, as Bataille understood, in the cyclical holocaust of war). "Sacred filth" is, say, *menstrual blood*, which has filled men with *dread* for a long time and given rise as a result to a variety of prohibitions (taboos) affecting pubescent females.³⁸ Furthermore, Frazer related how modern "civilized" nations have not entirely given up these rites, as they keep satisfying their archaic craving for scapegoating and solemn murder by executing *criminals*—the ultimate, modern foils for the sacrificial royalty of times long past.³⁹ *Crime* and religion thus unite under the sign of "awful sanctity."⁴⁰ In the end, as hinted above, the *Golden Bough* reads like one inexorable debunking exposé of Christianity's claim to religious originality (if not authenticity). The tale of a sun-king, son of an absent God-the-Father, born of a virgin (like Attis) at the winter solstice (like Dionysus, Apollo, and Mithras),⁴¹ who was slain before a lachrymose mother and resuscitated as the Redeemer at Easter, and whose body was transubstantiated into bread (a practice also known to the ancient Mexicans),⁴² appears to be a popular mythological template upon which the new Judeo-Christian orthodoxy grafted the economic radicalism of a mysterious and seductive Hebrew ascetic: the young teacher Joshua. As shall be seen, this thesis would inspire Bataille, who had begun his spiritual path as a Catholic seminarian, with a number of potent insights on the bloody pull of the Christian myth.

Apparently holiness, magical virtue, taboo, or whatever we may call that mysterious quality which is supposed to pervade sacred or tabooed persons, is conceived by the primitive philosopher as a physical substance or fluid, with which the sacred man is charged just as Leyden jar is charged with electricity; and exactly as the

electricity in the jar can be discharged by contact with a good conductor, so the holiness or magical virtue in the man can be discharged and drained away by contact with the earth, which on this theory serves as an excellent conductor for the magical fluid.⁴³

There might be reason to infer that even from this similitude drawn by Frazer between sacredness and electricity, Bataille derived imagery he would later turn to creative use in conceiving his brand of theology—a theology contemplating the clustering of a congregation around a sacred *core* by means of a peculiar bonding energy.⁴⁴ This is indeed the seed of that very conception, which Foucault, in turn, would imitate when he came to draft his academic fiction of Power/Knowledge.

Eventually, after struggling fiercely in order to subjugate the Goddess, the West came to be ruled by the One God through patriarchal dispensation. However, under the debris of the confrontation, which were rapidly swept under the rug of male rule, commandments forbidding human immolation, and a stratified regime of property, lay smoldering the ashes of the chthonic frenzy. Such a fury kept erupting ceaselessly and everywhere with vengeful defiance. War, systematic rape, torture, mass sacrifice, fascinated dismemberment of humans by humans, frenetic sexuality, intermittent madness, and mutilation and self-mutilation have always been indelible signs of the West's (and the world's) chronicles of inexplicable "madness" in its time of masculine, "rational" sacredness. But the striking aspect of all such deplored misdeeds, which pious commentators have systematically ascribed to some confused wickedness of the individual's "poisoned" psyche and faltering heart (a private, psychological affair, so to speak), was that there was a universal, recognizable *method*, often an instinctive, and *unaccountable logic*—a ritual—performed by men in killing or in defiling their fellow men. A method such that it could not have been merely the random, aggressive rush of male animality, of senseless instinct. Initiates, students of religion and of the esoteric, and several others—scholars or otherwise, including Bataille and his followers—have always traced these recurrent and methodical blood orgies to the irrepressible and unconscious drive, inherent in human nature, to join in sanguinary ecstasy the Dionysian-Aphrodisitic pole. Bataille wondered:

How could it be that in all places, without concert, men have found themselves in agreement to pursue an enigmatic behavior, that they all have felt the need or suffered the obligation to kill living beings in a ritual fashion? . . . [The "quiet man"] must acknowledge that death, the terror of sacred ecstasy are bound to him; failing to answer [this question], all men have dwelt in ignorance as to *what they are* [. . .] This it the key to all human existence.⁴⁵

It appears thus that our lust for blood, violence, and domination, as humans, is an urge with long roots, a primordial inclination that traditional monotheistic religions have endeavored to suppress through centuries of catechism and behavioral injunction. So far, Bataille intimated, the results of such a missionary effort have been mixed at best: the late record of atrocities committed by the united

peoples of Christendom is rather staggering, and it stands as a clear indication that the Dyonisian beast within us is far from being domesticated. The periodic consummation of holocausts represents humanity's occult desire to satisfy those very proclivities that were freely and naturally indulged before the "patriarchal redress." In this connection, the death of a chieftain-king in primitive societies, or the saturnalia and like feasts, in which interdictions are lifted, are cited as the classic illustrations of the armed truce existing between traditional rule and orgiastic manifestation. At these peculiar times—days marking a stark discontinuity in the traditional calendar—taboos and interdictions are upturned and the primordial powers of chaos may be unleashed (with various degrees of permissiveness). Anthropologists and historians have reported the savage violence that explodes in such intervals: social order is momentarily suspended, divisions are erased, and, in random order, the desire for intoxication, murder, beatings, rape, theft, ransacking, and promiscuousness is liberally indulged.

The social confusion of the type exemplified by the Saturnalia, erotic license, orgies and so on, symbolized retrogression to the Cosmic Chaos. On the last day of the year the universe was dissolved in the primordial waters. The marine [she-]monster, Tiamat⁴⁶—symbol of darkness, the formless, the non-manifested—revived and once again threatened. The world that had existed for a year *really* disappeared. Since Tiamat was again present, the cosmos was annulled; and Marduk was obliged to create it once again [from the monster's dismembered body], after having once again conquered Tiamat.⁴⁷

Thus, we may say that Bataille, and later Foucault, reckoned with three main spiritual forces that appear to have shaped modernity: (1) a compassionate tradition bound to a belief in transcendence (i.e., that there is something beyond this life, however impenetrable it might be to our hearts and minds), sacred geometry, and the good—this tradition we will classify from now on as "Apollinian"; (2) the mechanical age of industrial power, and its associated mentality of thrift and efficiency; (3) and the bloody worship of yore. Buddhism, Platonism and neoplatonism, for instance, would fall under the Apollinian category, whereas Christianity appears somewhat torn between the first and the third form of worship: it is indeed compassionate, but, as Bataille would obsessively remark, its myth is deeply rooted in blood and sacrifice (the crucifixion), as well as in its insistent offer of unbounded forgiveness, which, Bataille interjected with reason, implies perforce *the consummation of unbounded crimes*.⁴⁸ This is a central problem, and we shall treat it in detail in our discussion of Bataille's theology. As for these three spiritual forces, the first Bataille, as a young Catholic seminarian, used to fear, but he subsequently deemed it moribund and defeated, if not entirely meaningless; the second he saw as the *mediocre* usurper of "sacred energy" (i.e., the lifeblood of humanity)—sacred energy which, once it is harnessed to the machines and the logic of profit, becomes vitiated and assumes the form of what Bataille calls "*power*." The third was in his eyes the authentic path: though the rites of blood sacrifice were shocking, to embrace them was to him the most consistent, honest, and sensible practice if he were to make (non)sense

of this world in the face of its endless torment, inexplicable suffering, and the gaping abyss of death. In other terms, Bataille wished for a new empire of Kali: he longed to reconcile in one creed the blooming of flowers with the carnage of flesh. In the face of life's incomprehensible insanity, he howled:

A stupid and cruel sentiment of insomnia, monstrous sentiment, amoral, in agreement with the lawless cruelty of the universe, cruelty of a famine, of a sadism without hope: unfathomable taste of God for the extreme suffering of the creatures, suffering that suffocates and dishonors them. In being one with this boundless bewilderment in which I am myself at a loss, have I never felt more simply human?⁴⁹

To bring about a revival of the orgiastic cults in the modern era—a revival that, given the prosaicness of our times, can only be “filtered” or variously re-elaborated—Bataille saw but two avenues: either flirt with Fascism (of the Italian sort), which in the twenties and thirties he approvingly saw as a triumphal, *sovereign* regime founded on heroic violence; or contaminate the discourse of Liberal society with a view to nesting in its midst with subversive intent. In other words, what could be alternatively attempted (instead of fascism) was an aesthetic refashioning of language, and hence intellectual activity. A refashioning of language that would dis-habituate the subject to conceal shamefully the bestial within him, and that would loosen those inhibitory fences, which the legislators of rationality, from Plato onward, have been tirelessly erecting within Man since the days of the redress. After the collapse of Fascism in World War II, only the second alternative remained, which had indeed been the one that Bataille had pursued by necessity, and which the Foucauldians would attempt to perfect in the four decades since the death of their master in 1962. As shall be detailed in the section devoted to postmodernism, part of this aesthetic transfer conceived by Bataille, and later tested by Foucault, has succeeded, or better said, it has successfully accompanied certain social developments that have played out for the most part on the folkloristic scene. The recent vicissitudes of our lifestyles and intellectual fads, not to mention their late marketability (again a sign that power and “dissidence” ultimately work hand in glove), are evident proof of it. Witness, for instance, the increasingly acrimonious spar pitting males and females in the workplace, and the talk, literature, and body language associated with it; the flood of books written on the feminine divine, the Goddess, and the concomitantly imputed dismal ineptitude of male rule; academia’s tongue-in-cheek appreciation of primitive, holocaust-practicing cultures, which have been thereby promoted to the rank of “civilizations”; “primitive punk” as a line of casual wear, and tattoos and piercings as one of salesmanship’s late ploys to afford the unknowing masses anew a rudimentary system of rank and reputation founded on “fear of losing prestige”;⁵⁰ or Hollywood’s recent insistence on sexual ambiguity. What even this brief enumeration indicates is that our society has not truly paused to question itself and its latest patterns, let alone the interminable crimes and failures of its recent experience, in a comprehensive attempt to assess the *spiritual nature*

of the pernicious forces that pervade it. America and the West show no desire to reflect. Rather, what seems to fascinate everybody these days is the possibility of exploring and dallying with such surrealist lithographs and digital reproductions of ancient matriarchal cults of blood and sacrifice as were dreamt by visionaries such as Bataille. “Doubtless, no one will say,” the latter argued defensively, “that I desire to inaugurate new cycles of holocausts: I am merely conveying the meaning of ancient customs.”⁵¹ He did. And however one wishes to categorize the phenomenon, it is undeniable that the media have been strongly encouraging for years this pop injection and chain-store repackaging of ancient lore, especially through enthusiastic reviews of films, novels, and art exhibits focused one way or another on the fascination that blood, violence and death are often bound to arouse. Bataille and Jünger attached extraordinary sentimental value to the vestiges of these Aphrodisitic and Dionysian cults, and we shall see how this heretical nostalgia would eventually degenerate into the farcical counter-cultural conceit of the late Foucauldian fans such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. In the economy of Bataille’s system, this revisititation of Dionysian worship, however, could not have risen to become such a beacon of postmodern inspiration without the shaping of *myth*. Because, ultimately, what we call philosophy in the West is generally nothing more than an abstract rephrasing of one of a limited series of plots or myths, which form the collective anthology of our culture’s credences, beliefs, and superstitions. And the mythological pool from which Bataille would fish the majority of the narrative patterns and cosmogonic incipits for his project was the Gnostic one.

CHAPTER 3

Gnostic Fragments

We cannot grant [. . .] that the universe had an evil origin because there are may unpleasant things in it: this is the judgment of people who rate it too highly, if they claim that it ought to be the same as the intelligible world and not only an image.

Plotinus, *Against the Gnostics*¹

In this world there is good and bad: its good is not good and its bad is not bad. But after this world, there exists something truly evil, and this is the realm of the middle. It is the realm of death.

*The Gnostic Gospel of Philip*²

Gnosticism was a beginning in the discursive direction. Apostles of chaos are not individualists. They do not speak in behalf of or for the egotistical benefit of man; they indeed speak in behalf of disorder, of an impersonal principle of dissolution. On the other hand, lone misanthropes, who share their bitterness and spleen only with themselves, retain a tinge of decency and nobility—a nobility that the preachers of dissolution, instead, forever lose from the moment they open their mouths to lecture others about the ways of the world. The thick-skinned, careless drifter, if he so wishes, hates, destroys, and self-destroys, or desecrates in the silence of his solitude. It is his affair, one that he settles alone with the divinity whom he so deeply despises, or whose absence he so deeply resents. Diogenes the Cynic comes to mind; he is an all-time hero of the French pessimists³ and of Foucault as well. Diogenes, who spurned the powerful, masturbated in public squares, lived in a tub, and spat in the face of the rich, exposing their hypocrisy and self-righteousness, was the nihilist with an individualist's ethic. True to himself, to his irreverence, he was a novelist by day of life's absurdity, who wished for no school and disciples, or the vanities of prestige.

But when subversion becomes discourse, theory, or “tradition,” as it seemed to do in segments of the Gnostic production, the distaste of something altogether surreptitious is savored at once. A reasoned invitation to despise the world, as that of Gnosis, framed in philosophical form, is a “project,” *an attempt at religious conversion*. Apostles of chaos, such as the Gnostics or Bataille, live to deprecate order, coercion, sanctimony, discipline, and especially religious militancy, yet they always find themselves leading their assault, by speech and prose, against the constituted order with a religious fervor that is no less virulent, militant, or intolerant than that of their opponents. Apparently, the Gnostics too desire converts. But what for, one may doubt, if the world is, as they say, hopeless and senseless? Clearly, the apostles of chaos are torn. Bataille would repeatedly grapple with this dilemma; a few years before his death, he conceded: “I should have given up talking. I should have recognized my impotence and held my tongue”;⁴ and yet he didn’t. Nor do the apostles of chaos ever do.

And so they write.

They write since the early Christian era to lament, in the words of a modern commentator, that we humans “are exploited on a cosmic scale,” that we are the “proletariat” of a second-tier god (a “demiurge-executioner”), who exiled us, “slaves,” “into a world that is viscerally subjected to violence. We are the dregs and sediment of a lost heaven, strangers on our own planet.”⁵ “The order of evil,” is recognized through the incessant “necessity of destroying and devouring. A necessity so widespread, so planetary, that it places war and nutrition on an identical plane. Seen in this perspective, wars are nothing but an inescapable means by which communities feed themselves and survive. Nutrition has another natural consequence: defecation, the logical conclusion of corporal corruption.”⁶

This and much else is true of Gnosis. It appears to be a tradition in its own right, pre-Christian, which, after the drafting of the Gospels, joined the religious fray assuming the heretical color that is its trademark. As said in the introduction, its corpus is not at all homogeneous: it is for the most part a list of opinions of various schools reported by the Fathers of the Church, who were bent on confuting them. Often, the reports of ideas issuing from the same school vary egregiously from one another, and, in many instances, the Gnostic cosmogonies and mythologies—a dense blend of Mysteriosophy, biblical syncretism, and a welter of Eastern religious traditions—are so complex and esoterically foreign to the modern reader as to be literally impenetrable.

Nonetheless, a certain number of elements may be pertinently related to our discussion. First of all, as Gnosis, this tradition was passed on as “divine revelation communicated only to a few elect, morally and intellectually prepared, in contraposition to the common faith of the Christian masses.”⁷ It was an elitist discourse. Second, there runs through the various sects the claim that the human soul is a *spark* trapped in heavy matter, yearning for liberation—“The body is a prison,” said the Gnostic Carpocrates.⁸ Therefore, emancipation can only be attained by way of separation, alienation, withdrawal from the world—a withdrawal that may take the form of asceticism, or, more interestingly, of a sovereign

disregard for all human law, something describable as a self-satisfied sentiment of “perfection” immune to the scruples of ordinary, pious men. In other words, all sorts of “infamies”⁹ are permissible to the “perfects” so that they may free themselves from the enslaving cycles of reincarnation and join a superior realm of the Spirit variously defined.¹⁰ Third, many Gnostics, such as the young Epiphanes, advocated in the name of Justice “a community of equality” and unrestrained *communism* of possessions and sexual mates. They invited to *transgress* all those man-made laws that have been imposed to delimit property.¹¹ All such beliefs thus built on a deep sense of comradeship that united the adepts, by cementing the bond born out of misery and suffering in this world—a world depicted as a cold, often inhospitable realm. In this sense, it may be seen as “counterculture.” Fourth, as for the creation of the cosmos, creative and visionary narratives abound and systematic categorization appears impossible, although five themes recur in different contexts:

1. The heresiarch Simon Magus contends that the principle of all things is Infinite Power (*apérantos dúnamis*). Infinite Power bifurcates into two other seminal forces, themselves without end or beginning, which are Great Power, the masculine mind that governs all, and Great Thought (i.e., “discourse,” *epínoia*), the feminine principle that generates all.¹²
2. According to a captivating myth narrated by the Ophite Justin (“a devotee of the Snake,” from the Greek *ophis*), three are the principles of creation: two masculine, one feminine. The supreme Good (*o agathós*) resides in a superior sphere, while Elohim, the male, and Eden, the female, unite to fashion the cosmos. Each generates twelve archangels (eons), and man, Adam, seals their union: Eden gives him the soul, Elohim the spirit. But when Elohim ascends to the Father for a visit, and decides to remain by Him, thus forsaking Eden, the latter despairs and dispatches her angel Aphrodite (or Babel) to strike suffering and misery in the hearts of men by sowing strife and discord among them: to hurt Elohim for abandoning her, Eden torments him vicariously through man, who harbors the spirit of his father. But existence for man worsens still as another of Eden’s angels, Naas (“the serpent,” in Hebrew) seduces and rapes both Adam and Eve, instituting thereby adultery and pederasty. Thus is sealed the human condition: because the Father withdrew, man is condemned to a harrowing symbiosis with demonic presence presided by feminine (motherly) vengefulness. Angels are then sent to earth from the father Elohim to teach his creatures the way of ascension and deliverance from the entrapment.¹³
3. Another tale from the same school postulates the same three principles in the symbolic form of Spirit, Darkness (*skótos*) and Light. The followers of Basilides consider only the latter two and state likewise that these have no end and no beginning. Darkness is repeatedly associated with “the Abyss” or the element of *water*—“tenebrous, frightful, damned, wicked”—which, in its primordial vastness and intelligence, seeks to attract light in its bosom. Over the enlightened water, a powerful wind blows, whose undulating

progression resembles that of a snake; as the breath of the snake caresses the water, (earthly) generation comes into being.¹⁴

4. Then there is that favorite of deconstructivists, the famously obscure passage by Basilides of the “God that is not” (*o οὐκ ον θεός*), who, “without thought, sensitivity, will, intention, passion and desire,” wanted to create the seed of the world. Thus, it was said that “the God that did not exist created out of nothingness the world that did not exist, casting down under the seed that bore within itself all the world’s harvest.”¹⁵
5. Finally, in the darkly intricate mythology of the Valentinians (after the name of the schoolmaster, Valentinus), we are told of the generation by higher principles of a dozen eons, the last of whom, Sophia, in an act of temerity, improvised and resolved to procreate on her own. Her yearning to meet, understand, and rejoin her Father—the One God, ensconced in the highest sphere of being—pushed her to commit, alone, this senseless act: a mocking of divine creation. She inspired thereby an unknowing sub-god, the Demiurge, who, mistaking himself for the Supreme Being, crafted the earth. The fruits of this indirect creation—the so-called passion of Sophia (*το πάθος τες Σοφίας*)—are alternatively described as “amorphous,” and the resulting humans as “stupid, weak, deformed.”¹⁶ From Sophia’s sense of affright (*ekpléxis*), anguish, and dread for having committed this error, the *material* universe came into being, as well as its lord, the devil—the prince of this world (*o ἀρχων του κόσμου*)—and all the elements of villainy, suffering, and evil.¹⁷

Fifth, most Gnostic teachers allowed, if not encouraged, the free and unrestrained indulgence of sex and intoxication, which was the obvious corollary of a system of teachings that preconized a contemptuous indifference toward the destiny of this misshapen earth.

Though this set of creeds may not be unqualifiedly defined as “infernal” or “Satanic”—both of which attributes signify that the hierarchical principles dictated by religious orthodoxy are being turned on their head—certain of them nonetheless seem fecund enough to engender in the seduced listener a refusal to recognize a superior authority. When that is the case, traditional religious orthodoxy denounces these conceptions as “Luciferian.”¹⁸ Be that as it may, from this synthesis of Gnosis, one may recognize several discursive elements that appear connected to matriarchal and Dionysian forms of worship, namely, the myth of the “idle, withdrawn god”; the vengeful torment on earth inflicted by the angered or presumptuous Mother; the simultaneous appeal to equality, licentiousness, and promiscuousness; the ecstatic desire to break the bonds of matter; and the condoning of amoral behavior: the so-called sovereign disdain, which is one of Bataille’s defining traits. Even more to the point for the analysis of Bataille is the incipient deification of Nothingness, the reduction of human collective and existential dynamics to the self-contained circuit of Power/Discourse (*dúnamis/epínoia*), whose casual, impersonal shocks and countershocks come to

animate symbolically the gloomy and poky reign of a jealous, abysmal water furrowed by an all-seeing, powerful snake.

As will be recounted, Bataille would profess an adoring empathy for all these fragmented myths; he would eventually seek to resolve and patch them all, along with their special brand of morality, into a suggestive and vivid synthesis, which would make up his very “project.” In other words, he thought of remodeling the fables of Gnosis into a quilt of visions and a political economy of sacrifice, crowned by a *theology with no God*—something which, jeering Aquinas, he would title his *summa atheologica*.

Of the myriad deities, archons, eons, and divine emanations conjured by the Gnostics, Bataille would retain only the monstrous, aberrant ones—those which, according to myth, were conceived, born and crafted by *mistake*, and the byproducts of whose generation were sorrow and pain for the mortals. He would elect these to his *summa*, for they alone, in these semiacrylichal, fantastic pantheons of Gnosis, *made sense* to him symbolically. Bataille felt that they indeed appealed to our sense of “loss,” to our sense of “being simply human,” as he put it. All of which convinced him in the end that that there is no such thing as knowledge but only “non-knowledge,” and that “God” is indeed sordid matter—matter that spews out humanity *accidentally* and allows its amoral, alternate moods of birth and death to juggle such beings in a match delimited only by chance, play, and frantic squander. The sole genuine remainder of all this inexpressible contingency, which we call existence, is the irrepressible *laughter* that the brief, rational contemplation of such a life awakens in us. God has been turned on its head and then beheaded. Of it there remains but a carcass of matter, the nasty angels of Gnosis as pictures of our nightmares, and our stupefied giggles crackling in the background. This, in a nutshell, was the nocturnal theology of Bataille.

Without openly confessing this much, Foucault would become his most devout acolyte. Yet, instead of consuming himself, like his master, with literary hallucination, Foucault would focus on the *practical* aim of condensing the hallucination into a *system*—that is, into a self-contained philosophical corpus, buttressed by a compatible jargon. A system with which one could articulate all facets of social, psychological, aesthetic, and existential reality; a system of rational discourse, yet one driven by a religious (Gnostic and Dionysian) and vehement rejection of all notions of transcendence and benevolence. The final objective of all this appeared to have been the desire to craft a pedagogical *vademecum* by which modern man, who functions mostly by reason, could reconcile himself to his aboriginal bloody, chaotic, and frenetic double. Whether Foucault succeeded in fulfilling such an ambition is arguable—we will discuss this in greater detail later. What is certain, however, is that his admittedly ingenious construct was workable enough to attract the interest of the American intelligentsia in the late seventies, at the time when the last fires of rebellion were dying out and there was need for an ideology that could so immobilize the bourgeoisie as to prevent new kindlings of dissent to catch fire ever again.

CHAPTER 4

The Marquis de Sade: A Liberal Father to Them All

I reckon that for someone who wishes to reach the bottom of what man signifies, the reading of Sade is not only recommendable but perfectly necessary.

Georges Bataille¹

Back to France. What was Sade (1740–1814)? And why do Bataille and the Foucauldians set so much store by his name?

Sade is extremely important for he is the full-fledged prototype of the authentic modern man. He is at once a Liberal and a sovereign son of the “devouring Mother.” And as such he could not but be one of Bataille’s literary fixations.

Sade’s pornography is a collection of vignettes that function, in sequence, as raunchy preambles to an extensive cycle of lectures on life. They are monotonous tales of devout virgins continuously abused, guilty—so goes the moral—of imputing their haplessness and tribulations to their henchmen rather than to their own virtuous improvidence in a world naturally governed by injustice and prevarication. The reader is led to discover that imbecile benevolence is what loses the victims, and man in general. Sade was a Liberal in that he espoused fully the values of the Enlightenment: first and foremost the worship of Nature and Reason. His insight, however, was far more trenchant than that of his buttoned-up (French and Scottish) scholarly counterparts, for he took the rational creed to its ultimate boundaries, jettisoning triumphantly the paralyzing hypocrisy of the enlightened *Encyclopédistes*. And so he etched these characters, these blackguards and aristocrats—schizophrenic creatures of reasoned avidity and delirious savagery—with an earnestness that won him eternal fame. With Sade, it is as if the archetype of modernity—Defoe’s cold, fanatical, calculating and asexual Robinson Crusoe living solo on his island—had found itself invested with

monstrous passion. To picture Sade, think of Crusoe, the stranded utilitarian, utterly bereft of Puritanical pudicity, if you will. Sade's and Crusoe's politics is the same. But there is more.

Look at Nature, the Marquis intimated in *Justine*: Hasn't she fashioned beings stronger than others? And if so, isn't this her tacit suggestion to the ones to enslave, tyrannize over the others? Beyond death is nothing, isn't there? Reason tells us so.² And so vices and good deeds equally disappear into eternal insignificance at every moment. Why bother about morality or retribution if only the worms of the dirt await us after we shall have breathed our last? Now take the utilitarian's felicity calculus: if we agree that our goal in life is to maximize gain and pleasure (and therefore minimize pain), considering that strength is the law of nature and that death annihilates all, how then is it possible to pursue one's self-interest without hurting others and running roughshod over their will? It is indeed impossible, and therefore remorse for doing so and the appeal to moral sentiments were for the Marquis a belated cry of pharisaism and cowardice: "All men," he said, "are born isolated, envious, cruel and despotic; wishing to have everything and surrender nothing."³ Nature, Sade reiterated, wants us interested, selfish above all, and to wield force, be it the physical force of yesterday or the financial strength of today: the strong becomes the rich, the weak the poor.⁴ Selfishness, he sentenced, is the first law of nature.⁵ The wolf devours the lamb, and Nature does not protest, so why should we? "Let us accustom ourselves to evil," he counseled.⁶ Nature resolves herself into an equilibrium of nurturing good and devastating evil; and those notions in the end become relative, if not anodyne. Only the rhythm of this alternation of vivacity and rottenness seems to retain an enduring impression.

The state of Nature, syllogized the Marquis, is that of permanent war; it is the only one we know, the only one which truly behooves us. Why then, he taunted, should the strong and the weak resolve to stipulate a contract whereby each party is to barter a measure of jaundice for a modicum of peace? If men so did, the strong would lose the pleasure of privilege and the weak would surrender their feeble, though ever palpable, chance to overwhelm the bullies. Neither would gain. Yet since society is made of only weak and strong individuals, the pacific stipulation can claim no democratic basis in fact, and all sensible creatures shall therefore rebel against it.⁷

We are thus faced with two options; either the crime that makes us happy, or the gallows that prevents us from being unhappy.⁸

God. God is a "deific phantasm." The mind inquires: Is there not a prime engine, a universal mind . . . ? How much longer, Sade wondered, should our mind indulge the fine points of such a "pitiful extravagance"? "There is no God," he retorted, "Nature suffices unto herself."⁹ So religious myth is imposture, bungled tales, whose plots are as incongruent as they are repulsive. Worst of all, "most hateful" of all was to him Christianity's "barbarous law."

Of what worth is a leprous Jew, who, born of a slut and a soldier, in the seediest corner of the universe, dares to pass himself off as the instrument of the one that allegedly created the world!¹⁰

How can faith, he asked, resolve itself in the ritual consummation of God's body, which the bottom of our entrails churns into excrement each Sunday, and all of this "for the satisfaction of this tender son, heinous inventor of this monstrous impiety?" If God had truly craved our love, Sade raged, why would he speak to us in riddles, or by way of this "contemptible bandit" Jesus?¹¹ Why the mystery, the absurdity, and the absolute *senselessness* of the Revealed Word?

Nature. Nature, instead, did make sense to the Marquis: the passions of men are her ways; her laws are violent at times, but understandable. Nature wishes creation? It is with love that she thus inspires us. And if it be her wont that carnage should follow, she lodges in our hearts "vengeance, greed, lust and ambition," making *criminals* of us all, "the credulous agents of her caprices."¹²

A state of balance must be preserved; and it can only be so through crimes; crimes thus serve nature; if they serve her, if she demands them, if she craves them, can they give her offense, and who may be offended, if she is not?¹³

What of love, bonding, gifts (*l'aumône*)?

"The pleasure of charity," sentenced the Marquis, "is nothing but the indulgence of conceit": as if the act of gifting is made only to bend the recipient into the subjection of that most ignoble of all sentiments: *gratitude*.¹⁴ Sade inverted the logic of the almsgiving: if the acceptance of a donation is meant to bind us in a servile debt of thankfulness, the noble pride of strength then demands that we reject the offer, annul the exchange, secure what is needed by prevarication, and base thereby daily interaction on the sole principle of self-interested force. This is the *sovereign* conduct that would so profoundly captivate Bataille: a sublimated sense of (devil-may-care) haughtiness.

And woman? Woman, he said, is a creature of fierce temperament burning with the fire of erotic exuberance in far greater profusion than man. That, too, is Nature's wish: and so let men break the "antinatural" conventions of matrimonial procreation and subjugate for their individual enjoyment as many women as they please; likewise let women possess as many men as will quench their (voracious) sexual hunger. If one adds to this feminism of sorts¹⁵ that the Marquis rejected capital punishment—for to punish with death a man that *naturally* killed another, Sade reasoned, is to remove senselessly two men instead of one—then it isn't surprising to see why he has been ranked among the champions of the Liberal utopia.¹⁶ Correctly so, but he went further: behind the invective is the dark, religious side of his apostasy. Sade was certainly one of those who hated out of despair. A God, he accused, that doesn't bring succor to his supplicants, that sends them to war, starves them with famine, deforms them in the agony of epidemics; a good God, Sade concluded, that tolerates such evil, "ordering such

disorders,” cannot but be a “barbarous God, a weak God.” And so we are brought back to the tormenting question of theodicy—the paradox of a benevolent God towering over a devilish world—which reappeared in the memorable challenge of *The Brothers Karamazov*: Can the scream of a single child legitimize the inscrutable plan of a benevolent divinity? Sade, like many others, barked out a raucous “No”—a violent denial that slammed the gates open to his celebrated whirl of blasphemies and dreary smut. Sadean porn is a collection of imaginative skits, such as those of priests defiling with crucifixes defenseless maidens or sodomizing them after having inserted the holy wafers into their anuses.¹⁷ Alternatively, in a variety of other (repetitive) settings, Sade featured bankers, magistrates, doctors, teachers, and noblemen each and severally gang-raping the girls and boys of their captive harems in keeping with a carefully scheduled curriculum of coprophilia, hard beatings, floggings, torture, interminable seances of rupturing anal penetration, bloodletting, and grueling orgies pivoting on one or more castigated victims of choice. And after the brutal consummation, the perpetrators regularly turn to the prostrated preys, inciting them, with a jeer, to conjure their protective God or the powers of providential retribution, which are stupidly believed to avenge the suffering of the just.¹⁸ The escalating fury of the orgy, which is fed by additional feats of arson, prepotence, theft, more rape, murder, private decapitations, etc., finds release in the culminating ejaculation of the volcanic protagonists, who, jubilant for having broken all laws with impunity, are satisfied to explain that the misdeeds have been committed for the sake of “spilling their fuck” (*foutre*).

As stories of unrelenting excess, Sade’s novels are unreal. He might have acted out much of what he narrated (and gone to prison for it), but the novelty in his tales is less the Liberal sermonizing or the profanity than the very creation of *sadism*: that is, the union of sexual dissipation with “the need to hurt and kill.”¹⁹ Coupling the one with the other, his heroes strive to attain a damned orgasm, which transcends entirely the sexual stimulation that sets the carnal throbbing in motion. This violent eroticism, which shoots forth with vehemence in the literature of modernity through the weaves of the extreme, but nonetheless authentic, Enlightened (rational) discourse, is what fascinates Bataille. For the latter, sick, deviated lust, debauch, or vaguely defined sexual perversion are all psychologicistic attributions that have, in fact, nothing to share with the criminal attraction of Sade’s obsessive novels. These are not stories built to edify the slothful lubricity of libertine aficionados. Sade’s libertines, who live for pleasure, are great, *sovereign*, said Bataille, because they have annihilated within themselves all capacity for pleasure. By destroying all benevolence in themselves they have in return accumulated an immense power of devastation, which finally finds itself attuned to a comprehensive, divine “movement of total destruction.”²⁰ In Sade, Bataille recognized the eruption of aboriginal violence in its anguishing *sacrality*, whose essence the Marquis had only dimly perceived. Bataille prized Sade’s novels for their contemporary rendition of that holy flame of dissolution and surfeit that always burns, and that no organized religion, structure of power, or sentimental morality seems able to put out. Sade is a father to the postmoderns for

he is the first “classic” novelist who re-evokes, somewhat unconsciously, ancient, and once religious, practices of orgiastic violence in a modern, preindustrial setting; his is the earliest formulation of what Bataille envisioned as the “project.” The project is a delicate art to insinuate silent, unspeakable (infernal) mysteries into the common-day syncopation of modern prose; to couch violence, blood, and the *silent* terror of the dizzying Abyss in the balanced propriety of philosophical argumentation.

As said earlier, such a project is a counterfeit: a neat, syntactically clean narration of a brutal orgy distances us from the heat of the violence; it attempts to make us conscious of a moment of emotional disorder, which is driven instead by unconscious bestiality.²¹ It is a falsification, an artifice—a pretense, however, that Bataille thinks *necessary*. The greatness of Sade, for Bataille, was that, given the constraints of discourse, he nevertheless managed to afford violence a piece of conscience and allowed it thereby to *speak*, as when, for instance, the Marquis in real-life sadistic sessions offered himself up for flogging, but interrupted the castigation now and then to take a log of the lashes by incising with a knife notches on a tally.²²

Nobody before [Sade] has captured the general mechanism associating such reflexes as erection and ejaculation to the *transgression of the law*. Sade ignores the fundamental relation of the interdiction and of transgression [. . .], but he took the first step.²³

If the project never goes beyond crafting forgeries, the whole exercise ends up being a futile pastime. But if the “perfects” within the post-modern fold—that is, the masters and their most talented disciples, such as Foucault—are capable of sublimating the forgery, of reconverting the fakery into something new and authentic, they will have perverted language and made it a vehicle of subversive influence. In the words of Bataille, they will have achieved a project that escapes the project itself. This is a peculiar kind of alchemy—an alchemy of which Bataille said he held the key.

So Sade “took the first step”: he recognized that the mating of sex and violence is not a casual form of debauchery but a pattern, a “need,” almost—a profoundly disturbing one. It recurs in men’s dissipate deeds and attractions everywhere too savagely and too often to be set aside as mere perverse deviancy. What the Marquis failed to comprehend, however, Bataille remarked, is that this explosion of brutality and eroticism is the vertiginous surrender to *our keen proclivity, as humans, to break the taboo, the forbidden*. Allegedly, Sade, blinded by his Liberal, individualistic fury, had not fully appreciated his own insights, as when he spoke of our world as being one full of vices, in which foulness, as one “vibration, becomes general.” In this environment, the Marquis believed that we live through “a multitude of mutual shocks and lesions, where everybody regaining what he has just lost, finds himself ever anew in a state of happiness.”²⁴ “Happiness” for Bataille, though, was not the issue: happiness is a Liberal construct, a fiction; to him, the true task was to devise a theory that accounted for

collective behavior in a realm whose purpose is unknowable. Bataille found this theory precisely in assuming that our true activity is that of living, slaying, and dying—communing through those very “shocks, lesions,” and wounds (Bataille would borrow from the Marquis this and many other images)—and that *thought* (*la pensée, le discours*) is but an intermittent flicker of consciousness in the midst of this biological life process of expansion and contraction. A process punctuated by our raising the taboo (the interval of sanity) and our subsequent, insuppressible *transgression* of the interdiction (the interval of insanity). The ebb and flow, which ushers nowhere and cyclically regurgitates itself, is symbolized in Bataille’s vision by the headless monster (*l’Acéphale*). From this imaginative account Foucault would derive the central notion of *transgression*, which would later become a pillar of his idea of “resistance at the margins.”

CHAPTER 5

Bataille

An abandoned shoe, a decayed tooth, a nose too short, the cook spitting in the food of his masters are to love what the flag is to nationality.

Georges Bataille¹

Mystique

Georges Bataille was, without question, a religious type. That is, one of those individuals who yearn for the metaphysical Other, convinced that something unspeakable stirs beyond, or rather, *from within*, the tangible realm. A religious type with a stupendous knack for metaphorical construction, Bataille converted to Catholicism early on in his life. At twenty he joined a seminary to train for priesthood; he was a man with a *vocation*. But three years later, he seemed to have lost the faith entirely. Rather than surrendering to the self-contented atheism and mediocre agnosticism of his contemporaries, and true to his religious yearning, he marched straight out in the opposite direction and invented an elaborate system of worship—a veritable theater of devotional belief, complemented by a no less imaginative sociological appendix. The latter would be the authentic kernel around which Foucault would weave his discourse for the American audience a generation later.

We are accustomed to associate religion with the law, with reason. But if we dwell upon that which founds religions, *collectively*, we must reject this principle. Religion is doubtless—or rather, basically—subversive; it deflects the gaze away from the laws. At any rate, what it demands is excess, it is sacrifice, it is the feast, whose summit is the ecstasy.²

“My research,” Bataille wrote in 1934, “initially had a twofold objective: the sacred and ecstasy.”³ Allegedly, the conversion of Bataille was occasioned by a vision of ecstatic (out of body) revelation, which he recounted in what may called the experience of the umbrella.⁴

The Rue de Rennes was deserted. Coming from Saint-Germain, I crossed the rue du Four. I was holding an open umbrella and I don't think it rained. (But I hadn't drunk: I here say it, I am positive). I had this umbrella needlessly open. [. . .] I was very young then, chaotic and full of empty inebriations: a swirl of ideas uncouth, vertiginous, but already bursting with concern, rigor, and crucifying was running loose. [. . .] In this shipwreck of reason, anguish, solitary forfeiture (*déchéance*), cowardice, and phoniness were given their due: yonder the feast began anew. What is certain is that this drift, as well as the "impossible," stirred, exploded in my head. A space shimmering with laughter gaped its obscure abyss in front of me. Crossing the rue du Four, I became in this nothingness a stranger, all of a sudden. [. . .] I denied these gray walls that trapped me, I rushed in a sort of rapture. I laughed divinely: this umbrella, which I wore like a hood over my head, covered all of me (I covered myself on purpose with this black shroud). I laughed as one had never laughed before, the deep bottom of each thing opened, denuded itself, as if I were dead.⁵

For the first time, he felt like an insect, which had "fallen on its back"; he found himself helpless (*désesparé*), yet not palsied by panic. Looking about he did not think the situation "bad"; rather, he felt "excited."⁶

This moment of mystical truth was the beginning of Bataille's *inner experience* (*l'expérience intérieure*). It would also be the seed of a book belonging to his mature production (1943), in which the chronicling of his ecstatic sensations is for the most part incomprehensible, and the numerous allegories and metaphors that season the memoir are only of modest avail in clarifying the true color of this experience. But, again, epiphanies are by definition inexpressible, and their protagonists should never be faulted for failing to translate their portent into conventional prose. Moreover, there is no legitimate reason to doubt the veracity and depth of his vision. We take him at his word. He may very well have seen something. He must have glimpsed the Void. That, in itself, however, was by no means exceptional. But then, presumably, he had squinted deeper into it, underneath the parasol in the rue du Four, coming eventually to some sort of realization—a realization from which "the project" must have drawn its fundamental inspiration.

I know, as I founder, that the only truth of man, finally glimpsed, is that he is a supplication without answer.⁷

The Void is what Catholic philosopher Miguel De Unamuno (1864–1936)—an anti-Bataillean thinker in his own right⁸—dreaded the most.⁹ Unamuno was terrorized by the bottomless despair that arises from *the thought that there might be nothing beyond this existence of ours*. "I always felt," Unamuno confessed, "that nothingness was much more terrifying than the descriptions of the tortures of hell."¹⁰ Staring into the gaping nothing (*la nada*) is the moment of truth; that is when each man's ego decides, as the novelist within himself, what is humanly sensible to hope, to expect, to believe. Because faith boils down to a matter of choice: Unamuno's longing was to become himself God, "yet without ceasing to

be I myself, I who am speaking to you." He further reasoned:

To believe that there is no God is one thing; to resign oneself to there not being God is another thing, and it is a terrible and an inhuman thing; but not to wish that there be a God exceeds every other monstrosity [. . .]. [Some men] are atheists from a kind of rage, rage at not being able to believe that there is a God. [. . .] They have invested Nothingness with substance and personality, and their God is an Anti-God. [. . .] Is it not perhaps a mode of believing in God, this fury with which those deny and even insult Him, who, because they cannot bring themselves to believe in Him, wish that he may not exist? [. . .]. Being men of a weak and passive or of an evil disposition, in whom reason is stronger than will, [. . .] they fall into despair; and because they despair, they deny.¹¹

Like Bataille, Unamuno realized that, in the shadow cast by the Void, "life cannot submit itself to reason, because the end of life is living and not understanding." And because the mind is impotent to answer the queries that lurk in the maws of nothingness, it is then only "by love and suffering, [. . .] by hungering after [God]," said the Basque philosopher, that men come to know the mystery. "To believe in God," Unamuno concluded, "is to wish that there may be a God, to be unable to live without Him."¹²

But Bataille, "from a kind of rage," did not *think* so; and thus did not wish so. He remained too much a man of *reason*, even if one blessed by apocalyptic clairvoyance. And, after the rapture, reason told him that there might have been other (sacred) paths traversing which one could reconcile oneself with the terror of living.

Much of what Bataille wrote in the *Inner Experience* is the fruit of self-taught meditation on the very insufferableness of life. Midway through, he found himself examining studiously a series of photographs. They dated from the time of the Boxer Revolution, and portrayed a young Chinese man being methodically hacked into pieces, "beautiful like a wasp,"¹³ captioned Bataille. This was the man's punishment for having murdered a prince.

[This] young and seducing Chinese man, surrendered to the work of the executioner, I love him of a love in which the sadistic instinct has no part: he conveyed to me his sufferance, or rather the excess of his sufferance and that was exactly what I was looking for, not to take pleasure in it, but to ruin within myself what opposes ruin itself. [. . .] The part of me that sobs and curses, is my thirst to sleep in peace, my rage for being disturbed. Excesses are the signs [. . .] of what the world is in its sovereignty (*souverainement*): I could not but love him to the dregs and without hope.¹⁴

Bataille had obtained the set of photos in 1925; he became obsessed by them; he often mentioned "the punishment of the one hundred pieces" as it was called, and never parted from these images.¹⁵

So now we begin to understand. After the mad laughter on the rue du Four, it had become evident that God was indeed absent, but the beckoning chasm

that was left behind—the tenebrous sea of Gnosis—was not itself empty, but full of “love.” A peculiar, hopeless love, *but for destruction*. For Bataille, there was sweetness in butchery, mildness in the tearing of flesh: likewise, there was no sense in sobbing, crying, cursing, and protesting against the screaming pain and iniquity of the deeds of men—no justification, for this was the (sovereign) way of life. Nothing could alter it, and thus, instead of demurring stubbornly and idiotically—like the obtuse maidens of the Marquis de Sade—one ought to give in to the flow, to the natural cycle of generation and mayhem. He counseled: “Ruin within yourself what opposes ruin itself.” To conserve, to worship life was the feeling proper of traditional religion, of cowards.

Combat is the same as life. The value of a man depends on his aggressive strength.¹⁶

The tone of his confession is not truly Sadean: Bataille was adding something new, he was expressing a form of *empathy* for the carnage. The sovereign aristocrat painted by Sade was an isolated being, *Bataille wished instead to recreate “community.”* He wanted Sade without the Liberal egocentrism. The “experience” for Bataille is a voyage to the limits of human possibility. It is an endgame of *transgression*, in which the object is to burn, negate, and overcome all “limits, values, and authorities.”¹⁷ Bataille thus posed the central dichotomy between ecstatic rapture on the one hand and *thought* on the other. The latter he called indifferently *discourse* or *discursive thought*. But by the end of the experience, after object and subject have fused and the ego has dissolved, the seer finds that life is a question mark with no answer; if *that* is the authority, then there is no God.¹⁸ By feeling and reason alone, it appears to be just impossible to weave the breath of our physiological existence, drudgery’s ticktack and the screwy incidents of our sentimental patterns, into one, orderly sigh. Perfection and impurity, beginning and end, god and the devil: how is one ever to encase one into the other, and all of them at once into *theory*? It won’t do; hurriedly, Bataille took the aesthetic way out:

Gone crazy, deep within the infinite hollowness of possibility, God, in a flicker of lucidity, dreamt of being a sick man gnawed by bedbugs. He then became a bedbug that the sick man, having turned the lights on, found in a fold of the sheets and squished between his nails. This sick man fell asleep once more and dreamt: he dreamt of being emptied sand, without a lower or an upper bound, without repose, or tolerable possibility.¹⁹

From this realization onward begins the “dramatization of life.” What Bataille appeared to be saying was the following: if the benevolent God of traditional belief has left us to fend for ourselves in a world of cyclical butchery, it is incumbent upon us to make a poem of our lives, to reinvent them in the open space of the void, though not arbitrarily, but according to rituals, which the convulsions of life and nature suggest to our understanding. If the dramatization, he warned,

becomes interior and egocentric (we may think of Unamuno's "I" thirsting after God), then one falls back on the delirium of the Christian mystics: we run the risk of facing the usual jealous and exclusive authority of the vengeful One. We might, he averred, "squeeze too much being upon itself," and assume thereby the countenance of an "avaricious shopkeeper." No question of salvation, then, for salvation is "the most heinous of pretexts."²⁰

The sentiment behind this trembling attempt at redefining theology, is, as always, *resentment*: "Oh God the Father," wailed Bataille, "you, who in a night of despair, crucified your own son, who, in this night of butchery, as the agony became *impossible*—to be cried out—became the *Impossible* yourself and felt the impossibility till it became horror, God of despair, give me this heart, Your heart, which falters, which boils over and no longer tolerates that You exist!" In Bataille's lyrical indictment of Christianity, God, no longer knowing what to do, despairs and takes his own life by nailing himself to the cross. Rationally, therefore, what appears manifest of Christianity to Bataille is but "the hate that God has for himself." "If God failed this hatred at any moment," Bataille wrote, "the world would become *logical, intelligible*."²¹

To speak of God would be—dishonestly—to connect that of which I can only speak by way of negation with the impossible explanation of that which is [. . .]. GOD, if he were, would be a pig.²²

Thus, the culmination of joy cannot be joy itself, because it will end. But in *despair*, there is joy, because only death terminates it, and then we are no longer. *There* is the beauty of desperation, its "simplicity; it is the absence of a "bait" (*leurre*)—that which has the taste of hope after we bite it. Joy makes no sense, but despair, . . . despair is logical.²³

To affirm that the universe resembles nothing and that it is but amorphous is tantamount to saying that the universe is something like a spider or slobber.

Bataille is a man of reason, who, in the words of Unamuno, because he despairs, denies, and is still not satisfied, rejects the notion of God to invest "Nothingness with substance and is personality." This, in brief, is the introduction of his project, and the (not so) covert aleph of the postmodern deception. It is an old cycle of rage, re-proposing itself. And so for Bataille here we are, forsaken by a self-hating, and ultimately nonexistent, God, and caught between the waters of chaos and the deep blue of the discursive sea.

Knowledge. The inner experience, Bataille insisted, leads to *nonknowledge* (*le non-savoir*): this is the ultimate truth, which, at face value, is remarkably similar to what traditional wisdom teaches, namely, a humble surrender before the inexplicable and a profession of faith in spite of all. Bataille, of course, did not settle for resignation. He had a programmatic syllabus of his own. Like the Gnostics, Bataille had no desire to agonize, solo, in his own despair, and let the others, in their own private insanity, believe. No, *he wanted to talk (j'ai voulu parler)*,

to be published, to reach out—he wanted converts. And so he had to speak to them by way of discourse.

Yet, “language is indigent.”²⁴

It might be indigent, Bataille conceded, but it is necessary. “The word silence,” he admitted, “is still a noise: [. . .] I have opened my eyes, but I should not have said it.”²⁵ If nonknowledge—the great unknown—is the terminus of the experience, “absolute knowledge is but one form of lore (*connaissance*) amongst many.”²⁶ At this juncture, Bataille was about to develop the decisive passage from abstraction to practice. “As far as human beings are concerned,” he wrote, “their existence is tied to *language*: each person imagines, knows its existence with the help of words.”²⁷ But knowledge—discourse—can be “enslaving,” so the problem is to retain language as a means of communication without falling once more in the trappings of divine authority, of something commanding from on high. Two instruments are at one’s disposal: discourse and “the project.” Discourse, contrary to what the late Foucauldians would suggest, is not in its original formulation a label for *any kind of rhetoric* emanating from an established authority—be it religious, bureaucratic, or utilitarian. And this can only signify that “discourse” is that symbolic speech with which humans have in fact articulated science by saying from the outset “I.” It is unmistakably the language of truth; humans, after they become aware of their uniqueness, embark on their quest. And once the consciousness flows, they go ahead: they measure the circumference of the earth, sculpt Laocoon, write *Richard II*, or compose the *Pastorale*. They may go astray, too; they may lie, they may err, they may botch the canvas, they may do nothing. But the game remains open. And even when discourse brings them face to face with the unnamable, they are undeterred: they love to create, above all. Bataille, too, could not resist the creative impulse himself, though he yielded to the torment of an anguished predicament, tearing himself to pieces in the dead end of *impossibility*. That is why he feared the humanity of discourse, because it leads to an *affirmation of life*. But Bataille was nevertheless confident that he could “contaminate” conventional discourse enough to confuse the soul and obtain, as a result, a special lexicon with which modern individuals could pay homage and offer prayers to the lingering spiritual residue of foul, bloody sacredness.

And “the project?”

The project was Bataille’s wish to create a philosophy, whose perverted discourse could fashion a sense of relatedness amongst human beings—a *community*—without leading them to an embrace with a superior, transcendent principle of authority—the cruel, indifferent God of orthodox monotheism.

The door must remain open and shut at the same time. What I wanted: profound communication between beings to the exclusion of the link necessary to projects, which discourse forms.²⁸

The inner experience is to the project, said Bataille, what a festering wound is to the assurance of a forthcoming recovery: the one is life, the other is but a

rationalization of human suffering. Thus, even if we may envision a certain recovery, the wound of our body is no less excruciating here and now. The project is that old Sadean experiment to make violence and suffering, which are by nature silent, *speak*. As mentioned earlier, there is something fundamentally inauthentic to such a project—even Bataille lucidly acknowledged it. One must nonetheless *make use* of it, he intimated: “It must be maintained.” In the case of suffering, reason should intervene to placate anguish by inviting the suffering individual to assume a dispassionate and cynical detachment from the suppurating wounds inflicted upon us by existence. The key to a successful realization of the project is “harmony,” as opposed to passion, which kindles instead the impatience of desire. Bataille thus suggested that individuals employ “discursive thought” as a “mocking varlet” (*un valet moqueur*), who, “skeptical, ignoring nothing,” should be available to serve and prop up the experience and be properly trained to withdraw discreetly whenever experience, its master, should claim absolute privacy for the duration of the revelation.²⁹

I have drafted the project to escape from the project! And I know that all I need to do is to crush the discourse in me.³⁰

This obscurely defined “project,” which Bataille could never quite actualize, was to create a medium of communication and expression for a congregation of individuals, whose social exchange was to circulate, like energy, along a *network of cross-relationships*. Thus, communication for Bataille came, by analogy, to be likened to the energy of “electric current” or “solar heat”³¹—the analogy he had taken from Frazer’s *Golden Bough*. To continue with the metaphor, the energy is to seep through human beings by way of their open *wounds and lacerations* (Sade’s *déchirures, blessures*).³² Here, already, we may recognize the blueprint for Foucault’s theory of power.

Bataille upturned our modern conviction that humans function for the most part as rational beings in a state of awakened consciousness. He reversed the ratio of thinking to unthinking time, and warned that “the error begins only when this reflecting conscience [of ours] takes seriously the brief respite which the circumstances allow it. This respite is nothing but an interval for recharge. Conscience itself is meaningful only when it is communicated.”³³ It then follows for Bataille that the whole realm of existence and perception surrounding us is in fact *violence*, and “discursive thought” becomes but a hiccup, a flash going off in the night of terror, which for an instant—“the brief respite for recharge”—casts about the individual a niche of self-consciousness where such despairing truth manifests itself cruelly. “[Reason] is reason,” Bataille wrote, “to the extent that it is exclusion, that it is the limit of Violence.”³⁴

Against half-measures, egresses, and the deliriums that betray the great poetic impotence, there can only be the counter-thrust of our rage, black, and even an inexpressible bestiality: how else is one to agitate if not by wallowing like a pig in the dung, gorging in the fange, tearing all things with the snout, driven by a repugnant

voracity that nothing can stop. [. . .] WE ARE TRUCULENTLY RELIGIOUS and, to the extent that our existence is the condemnation of all that is accepted today, an interior exigency demands that we act imperiously. What we here undertake is a war.³⁵

Thus, like the bull in the corrida, man would no longer be the Void's toy, but it is the Void that becomes the toy of man: and in the abyss, Bataille insisted, we lose ourselves in billows of contagious *laughter*, which travels fast from one (human) source to another. "Words, books, monuments, symbols, guffaws are but the myriad trails of this contagion, of these passages."³⁶

I am, and you are, in the vast flux of things, but a punctuation propitious to the rebound (*rejaillissement*). [. . .] This human life, which is our lot, the conscience of a bit of stability, even of the profound lack of any veritable stability, unleashes the spells of laughter. [. . .] Common laughter presupposes the absence of a veritable anguish, and yet, it has no source but anguish itself.³⁷

And so the seed of the project had been planted, the discourse somewhat subdued, and the door partially shut . . . only to be reopened intermittently so that the phantasms of Gnosis could be ushered in.

The Monstrous Archons

The Aztecs started out as a warrior civilization that rested on heredity and the hierarchy of classes; they had a solar calendar and an imperial administration. By the time the Spaniards came ashore to crush them, it appears that they had undergone "a characteristic degeneration in the direction of a special and sinister Dionysism, which may be called frenzy of blood. [Their human sacrifices], even in the form of collective slaughter, were performed in order to maintain contact with the divine but with a dark, fierce exaltation derived from destroying life, the likeness of which is to be found nowhere in the world."³⁸ The blood orgy was officiated by an intimidating caste of priests. They kept themselves in spiritual unison with the gods through the shedding of their own blood, which was made to ooze continuously by making incisions and piercings at the temples, scrotum, and tongue with maguey thorns. The plentiful blood, which the gods demanded, however, was not merely the trickle of the priests' temples and genitals, but the loads of lifeblood that were going to be distilled from victims, sometime slain by the thousands in the brief interval of a day. "In 1428, the ruler Itzcoatl, and his adviser Tlacocel, initiated a policy of conquest, encouraging the Aztecs to think of themselves as [the gods'] *chosen people*, whose mission was to feed the sun" with captives of war. Thenceforth a tradition was established, which required an amount of drained bodies and resected hearts ranging from ten- and fifty-thousand per annum.³⁹

At birth, the midwives cut the umbilical cord of the future warriors of the empire, intoning a propitiatory lullaby that greeted the newborn as creatures

“whose fatherland lies elsewhere,” born to fight and feed the enemies’ blood to the Sun.⁴⁰ As known, the sacrificial victims were subjected to a rich menu of rituals. For instance, as offerings to the Fire God, they were roasted alive, but before death could intervene, their blistered and scorched bodies were cast off the blaze with hooks and opened to extract the hearts.⁴¹ Alternatively, the “priests flayed men and tortured children to death so that their tears might induce the [rain god, Xipe Totec] to send more rain.”⁴² The skins of flayed men and women were then worn by the sacrificing priests in deference to the respective male and female gods, whose icons were represented in the guise of anthropomorphic figures fitted with hooded suits and masks made of human flesh. The disemboweled and decapitated bodies of the sacrificed were dismembered, and the choicest pieces sent to market to fetch a good price in chocolate. The Daphoene of the Aztecs was named Caotlicue, and like the Indian Kali, she wore a skull-pendant suspended from a necklace. “Her head had been severed, and from the neck [flowed] two streams of blood represented by snakes whose heads meet in profile to form a grotesque caricature of a face.”⁴³

“Death for the Aztecs,” Bataille commented, “meant nothing.” “The Mexicans asked of their gods not only to make them receive death with joy, but even to help them find in it charm and sweetness.” The Aztecs,” he stated, “were probably just as religious as the Spaniards, but they mixed with their religion a sentiment of horror, of terror, linked to a kind of black humor even more terrifying than horror.” Bataille appreciated the Aztecs: amid the complexities of imperial management, they had achieved a workable balancing of life and death, of laughter and horror—an equipoise, which, in its bloody elegance, put to shame, in his eyes, the ravages of the contorted Christian West. A world, the Western one, that was itself disfigured by endless violence and a mal-digested worship of the biblical, benevolent God. “Mexico,” he continued, “was not only the bloodiest of human slaughterhouses, it was also a rich city, a veritable Venice with canals and footbridges, decorated temples, and especially very beautiful flower gardens.” “These ferocious warriors,” he concluded, “were but affable and sociable men like all the others,” who consorted lively at banquets, where the consumption of intoxicants was customary.⁴⁴

The way the Mexicans abused death casts us before the abyss. To this abyss, doubtless, we shall never cease from inching closer, attracted as we are by terror (*l'effroi*), but I should like to turn momentarily away from it, and consider solely the glory, exclusive, which the Mexicans pursued.⁴⁵

Beginning with the Aztec cult, Bataille launched into a vast anthropological quest to disinter the vestiges of the primordial Dionysian-Aphrodisitic tradition, of which he had appointed himself modern-day hierophant. *The exploration consisted in identifying all those clues in the realm of creation and social memory that bore the imprint of darkness, and in raising their status, again.* He clearly understood that in the past millennia the Churches of the vengeful God, whom he had come to reject irremediably, had labored strenuously to eradicate, efface, break,

alter, and conceal all traces of these ancient, violent cults (and not without administering a torrent of violence themselves). And for Bataille, it became part of his sacred mission, now that he had forever abjured the Catholic God of his green days, to bring them back and enshrine them anew but in an environment that was alien to the one in which these cults originally emerged. Hence all that nebulous preamble about experience, project, and discourse. Bataille's entire production in one form or another was concerned with this effort at revival: from a bizarre note on the big toe, which many cultures hide from view given its manifest bestiality, to the study of eroticism or economics by way of Gnosis, Bataille pursued the project of converting the modern mind to the bloody altars of the sacred Elders. Surviving traits of the ancient madness in our modern world are to be found everywhere, in fact. Bataille dwelt on self-mutilation and cited the celebrated case of Van Gogh's ear—which found its way, not at all accidentally, Bataille remarked, *to a brothel* (a central venue of sacred, erotic dissipation, presided by Aphrodite the whore)—as well as other instances drawn from daily chronicle, in which common men, in sudden fits of inexplicable frenzy, bit off their fingers, and so on.⁴⁶

Gnosis. Here Bataille, as set out earlier, was on kindred ground: "In essence," he wrote in this regard, "it is possible to single out as the leitmotiv of Gnosis the conception of matter as an *active* principle, possessing its autonomous eternal existence, which is that of the tenebrous depths (which are not the absence of light but the *monstrous archons* revealed by this absence),⁴⁷ that of evil (which is not the absence of good, but a creative act)."⁴⁸ It is revealing to see how Bataille modeled the Gnostic tradition into a devil-loving bent, which is not so patent from the Gnostic originals themselves. Bataille, in fact, acknowledged his bias and admitted that the "evil archangels" were systematically evoked by the Gnostics as (deviant) emanations of higher entities. "But," he persisted, "the despotic and bestial obsession of the evil and lawless forces appears undeniable, in metaphysical speculation as well as in mythological nightmare. It is difficult to believe that taken as a whole Gnosis is not above all a testimony of a sinister love for darkness, of a monstrous taste for the obscene and lawless archons."⁴⁹ *Ipse dixit.*

Everything that follows—orgies, intoxication, and the magic practices of the black arts—is for Bataille a positive expression of what he calls "base matter," which, being the polar opposite of spiritual transcendence, must be unconditionally embraced and penetrated to the full in willing defiance of all prohibitions sanctioned from the heavens. At this juncture, his project appeared to be drifting toward the carnivalesque appeal of the modern Luciferian Churches, and, truth to be told, the flavor of his anti-Christian manifesto, which will be detailed shortly, differed little from the pop proclamations of those saucy manuals for the closet-Satanist so in vogue during the era of Haight and Ashbury.⁵⁰ Bataille went on:

If today we abandon overtly the idealist viewpoint, as the Gnostics had implicitly abandoned it, [. . .] the attitude of those that saw in their own life an effect of the

creative action of evil appears even radically optimistic. It is possible to become in all freedom a toy of evil if evil itself does not have to answer before God. Before an authority like that of God, which the archons confound by way of an eternal bestiality. Because the point is above all not to submit self and reason to anything loftier. [. . .] This Being [of ours] and [our] reason can only submit to what is basest, to what cannot in any case ape an authority of any kind. I submit myself entirely to the matter that exists outside myself. Base matter is foreign and alien to the human ideal aspirations and refuses to be reduced to the great ontological constructs resulting from these aspirations.⁵¹

In sum, Bataille did not naively swap God for Satan, so to speak, not in words at least. He committed himself to a form of pantheistic aestheticism, referring preferably to the “obscene archangels of evil,” whose bestiality makes a perennial mockery of the Kingdom of Heaven. Instead of moving up, he opted to sink down, so far down that he wished to reach a point of annulment where he found no inverted ape-God but a tumultuous reconciliation with an ambivalent blend of darkness and brightness—the ambivalence of, say, his beloved Kali—the patroness of destruction, chaos, night, prostitutes, cholera, and cemeteries.⁵² Yet Kali, the archons, and the Aztec demons appeared to be mere allegorical egresses for Bataille; he had no intention of making the mistake of erecting another idol on a pedestal, though there is reason to suggest that he somewhat failed in this intent.

This goat-faced, cloven-footed Satan, with his stable-smelling arse, such as he is depicted—gleaming in the Sabbath—by the powers of a collective imagination presently on the defensive; this hideous countenance conjured up by the unhinged nervousness of the Christians, is it not, so close to us, the emanation of Dionysus?⁵³

At any rate, he recognized the existence of demoniacal influences *outside* himself, which are capable of endless seduction—and that by itself is a sonorous avowal of religious belief. Indeed, the principle of Dionysus to him is “the divine in its purest state,” a principle “unscathed by the obsessive desire to eternalize a given order.” Dionysus’s poesy is not the melancholia of the lone rambler, nor his tragedy the murmur of the ecstatic hermit. In Dionysus Bataille saw the *crowd*, instead.⁵⁴ Bacchus is the subversive god of the maddened throng. “Satan,” he wrote, “led the witches’ coven, Dionysus the maenads’, and the lasciviousness in both instances was the venomous heat of the games. [. . .] The two divinities (for the devil is *divine*) incarnate in their personage the same rites—of orgiastic fury, of nocturnal frenzy: and if there is no necessary continuity between these rites, there is at least contact, contagion.”⁵⁵ But instead of worshipping by kneeling down, he intended to repay Dionysus and the archons, ritually, with their same currency, not by genuflecting but, as he would fantasize in his novels, by carousing with them, as an equal, spitting back at them the muck, blood, and excrement that they smear daily on the faces of humans for mere sport (in this connection, Bataille alluded to the dark humor of the Aztec gods).

To say “God is evil” is not at all what one imagines. It is tender truth, it is love for the death, a slip into the void, towards absence.⁵⁶

But what of the traditional archons of light, Apollo, Michael, Marduk, and the others? Simple: they don't exist. Kali is made to cover both sides of the ledger—a giver and destroyer of life, all in one. Thus, no more dichotomy or theodicy. This is Bataille's revengeful payback to the Church for having, like a miserable cheat, erased the monstrous archons from the sacred narrative. Religious orthodoxy, in fact, has surreptitiously cast Satan out of the sacred circle and reduced him to a profanity, tossing the rebel angel in the pile of refuse and psychological aberration, with the covert intent to kill altogether the very thought of him in the minds of men. As Bataille revealingly put it, "The impure sacred was dispatched into the profane world. [. . .] The confusion of the impure sacred and the profane seemed for a long time contrary to the sentiment that memory had conserved of the intimate nature of the sacred, *but the inverted religious structure of Christianity required it.* One of the signs of this decline is the scant attention paid in our time to the existence of the devil: one believes in it ever more infrequently. [. . .] This means that the black sacred, being ever more poorly defined, loses in the long run any meaning."⁵⁷ And so it was Bataille's duty to give "black, impure scared" its long due after years of conspiratorial suppression on the part of the Judeo-Christians. For that, he performed the opposite operation: to kill the conception of the benevolent God, *he reversed the terms of the orthodoxy and cast God into the profane realm, identifying it with reason, discourse, or rationality;* in other words, he classed (Catholic) Christians and utilitarians in the common despicable lot of dried out, philistine, and *irreligious* oppressors. He accused *them both* of having perverted the (bloody, impure, and true) sacred.⁵⁸ This equally surreptitious reversal and mystifying—though not entirely illegitimate—confusion of Judeo-Christian sacredness and utilitarianism has passed the test of time, and has in fact become the chief battle cry of the postmodern legions. It is for the most part the astute construction of Bataille. "I do not hate God at all," he explained. "Basically, I ignore him. If God were what they say it is, it would be *chance*. To substitute chance for God is no less insulting to my understanding than it is for a devout person to do the inverse [. . .]. The only grace that we may wish for is that [chance] should destroy us tragically instead of letting us die of hebetude."⁵⁹

In Bataille's view, the Christian has made himself ill with fanatical *renunciation*; he has renounced to know the value of man in order to affirm in its stead that of a principle which condemns him to a *resigned servitude*—to Bataille, the Christian devotee is a benighted slave.⁶⁰ But by abjuring and embracing the monstrous archons, Bataille had set himself free: he and his former Catholic self were presently even. The question was settled.

I imagine myself covered in blood, crushed but transfigured and in agreement with the world, both as a prey and as a jaw of Time, which kills ceaselessly and is ceaselessly killed.⁶¹

This is in synthesis Bataille's *acephalic theology* or "theopathy" (a painful feeling of the divine):⁶² it initiates with a descent into the abyss, which is "the experience."

The experience is transgression, an act of revolt (*contestation*)—they are one and the same. In the darkness of ecstasy Bataille found no God but a tenebrous cycle (of generation, chance, and destruction), traversed by solar energy in perennial flux, whose motion has historically suggested to the human imagination the existence of a troubling plot hatched by a richly decorated pantheon of obscene archangels. The ebb and flow of power through base matter, which humans accompany with the waves of *laughter*, spirals into a climax of eternal defeat—of annihilation, of matter refusing to culminate into anything—and finally wanes down to the origin to initiate a new round.

We have laughed of a laughter pure and remorseless that allowed us together to penetrate into the secret core of things [. . .]. Whoever wishes to focus his action upon this point of vertiginous fall must be possessed of great strength [. . .]. All enclosures collapse, and the convulsive contractions of the laughers are unleashed and reverberate in unison. Not only does each of them partake in the undefined streaming of the universe, but he fuses himself into the laughter of others, so completely that, in a room, there are no longer several laughs, independent from one another, but a single wave of hilarity [. . .]. Beyond the knowable realities, laughter traverses the *human pyramid* like a network of endless waves, which would renew themselves in every direction. This reverberated convulsion strangles from one end to the other the immeasurable being of man—climaxing at the summit through the agony of God in the black of night.⁶³

To characterize the idea of this eternal return that erupts into eternal nothingness Bataille conjures the allegory of a headless, acephalous God: the *Acéphale*, which was illustrated by Bataille's friend, the French surrealist artist André Masson (1896–1987) (see figure 5.1).

Beyond what I am, I encounter a being that makes me laugh because he has no head, who fills me with anguish because he is made of innocence and crime: he holds a weapon of iron in his left hand, flames similar to a sacred heart in his right. He unites in one same eruption Birth and Death. He isn't a man. Neither is he a god. He isn't myself, but He is more than I: his stomach is the labyrinth in which he has lost himself, and I myself with him, and in which I find myself being him, that is to say, a monster.⁶⁴

Fizzing with excitation before the prospects of his newly crafted religion-toy, Bataille founded his own “secret society” in 1936, *L'Acéphale* (and released a homonymous publication), which gathered a consorterie of Parisian aesthetes, writers, and *artistes* (including Masson) desirous to experiment with the obscene occult. Sade, Dionysus, and Nietzsche were the tutelary figures of *L'Acéphale*. This fraternity of dilettante, Aleister Crowley-wannabes, “performed strange rituals, including the sacrifice of a goat,” though what was truly needed to bond “irremediably” these “initiates” to one another was a *human* sacrificial victim. Queasy bourgeois that they were, alas, it appears that none of the founding members volunteered to offer themselves up for the slaughter. Bataille’s biographer,

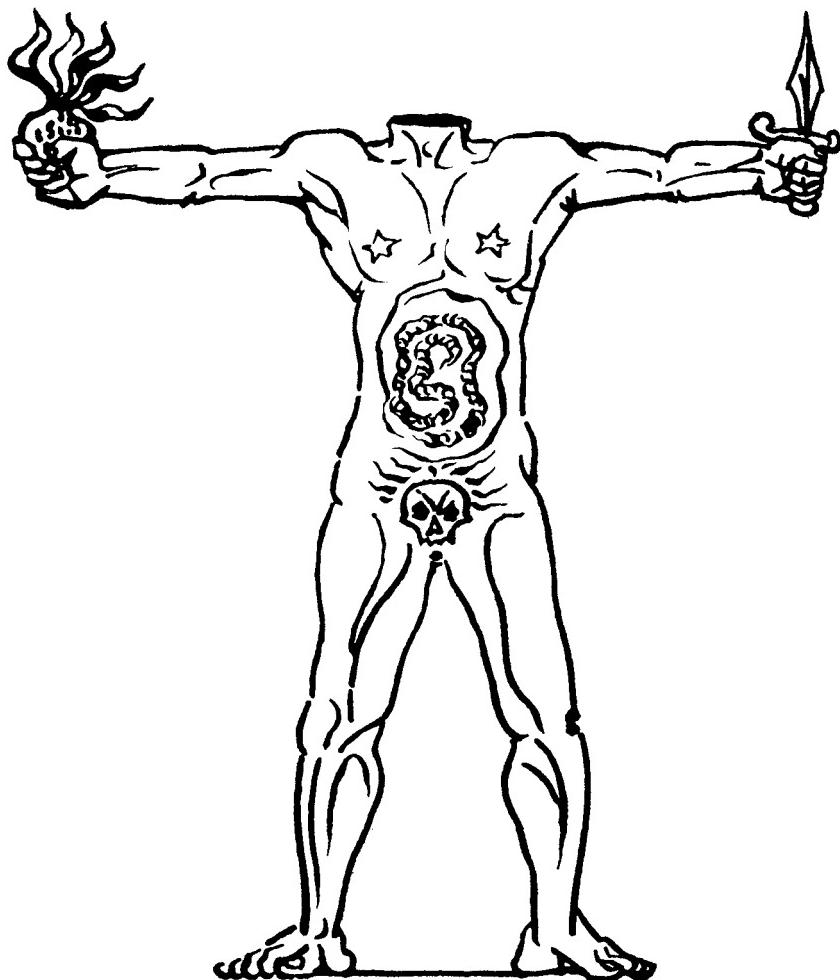


Figure 5.1 Bataille's *Acéphale*, sketch by André Masson. © ARS/ADAGP

however, suggests that a consenting victim was indeed found—someone possibly outside the inner circle—but no sacred henchman to dispatch it. Whatever the truth of this folly—all members having shielded the society with the deepest silence—Bataille would later avow that “in time his collected works would account for both the error and the *value* of this monstrous intention.”⁶⁵ Hardly a recantation, or the expression of remorse. “The group,” as earnestly related by a deferential Bataillean academic, “was to be a community formed to lift guilt, acknowledge the role of decomposition in a positive way, practice asceticism, practice acephalic play, practice perversion, acknowledge the universal nature of all communities, and change the world by affirming the role of aggression in power.”⁶⁶ “Acephalic play?” Though no one never found out what “acephalic

play" actually was, it is however revealing to discover how completely unfazed these the modern admirers of Bataille have been by the solid reality and celebration in *L'Acéphale* of the holocaust.

The "program" of *L'Acéphale* included the following points:

3. Assume the function of destruction and decomposition, as an achievement not as a negation of being. [. . .]
6. Take upon oneself perversion and crime not as exclusive values but as values needing to become integrated into human totality. [. . .]
9. Participate in the destruction of the world that exists, looking forward to the world that will be. [. . .]
11. Affirm the value of violence and of the will to aggression insofar as they form the basis of all might.⁶⁷

Such a manifesto might have sounded risible in the late thirties, but considering how far this project has gone with postmodern discourse—which, as we will see in our overview of Foucault and the Foucauldians, has remained overall faithful to Bataille's original—one cannot but remain deeply perplexed by this thinkers' uncanny powers of posthumous persuasion. In his 1936 novel *Le bleu du ciel* (Blue of Noon), Bataille had written: "Because I was driven by a happy insolence, I had to overturn everything, by any means overturn everything."⁶⁸ We may ask: To what end? What for? For an impractical return to the bloody origins of the earth vacated by the celestial principle? So it seems.

The cult of Satan replaced that of the ancient divinities. That is why one may without absurdity recognize in the devil a *Dyonisus redivivus*.⁶⁹

Eroticism

So if I state, "in order to pray," I am following an innate instinct that is no weaker than the sexual drive—in fact, even stronger. The two are alike insofar as foul things can happen when they are suppressed.

Ernst Jünger, *Eumeswil*⁷⁰

By the time he had broken his Catholic fast and cast off the cassock, Bataille had practiced much "acephalic play": an assiduous frequenter of Parisian bordellos till the end of his life, he had savored therein the taste of debauchery, which he sipped in a variety of pungent aromas. "My true church," he would later write, "is a whorehouse": in youth, he had been "anguished by all things sexual."⁷¹

During the late twenties, Bataille had come to orbit as a somewhat diminutive satellite in the periphery of the Parisian artistic and literary milieu, especially its surrealist wing, where he established the reputation of a "pervert" (*un obsédé*)—so was he judged in any event by the surrealist founder André Breton, who alternatively referred to Bataille as the "*philosophe excrément*." The famous Sartre, instead, thought Bataille *un fou* (a madman).⁷² Living up to his budding infamy, Bataille had also tried his hand at Russian roulette; he survived the

“experience” and went on to write porn, of the “sophisticated kind,” that is. His first book is one of such “sulfurous”⁷³ novellas, the not unknown *The Story of Eye*, published in 1926 under a pseudonym—not to mix his two identities: a respectable librarian by day, and an acephalic monster by night. Penguin, the prestigious New York publisher, reissued the English translation in 1982. Bataille’s first opus was thus granted in the Anglophone world the status of “classic.” What is it about?

It is a morbid, quasi-autobiographical sketch, which opens with memories of carnal initiation in the provincial depths of France. Soon after this introductory, the tone varies as surrealist imagery of urine and of eggs, which pop up ubiquitously as props symbolizing the eye, is woven into the erotic fantasies of the protagonist-narrator and his young lover Simone (we are told in the appendix by Bataille that his father, blinded by paralysis, wetted himself regularly, hence the association). The narration proceeds with these accounts of Simone playing with and urinating on eggs, and of partouzes in the countryside. One of such little orgies goes awry and the violence of it shocks one young girl, who loses her mind and commits suicide. By the corpse of the girl, and excited by the cadaveric aura, the two young protagonists consummate intercourse for the first time. Afterward, the setting changes entirely, and we follow the sexual overkill of Simone and the narrator all the way to Seville, where they travel as retainers of a British voyeur, Sir Edmond. As one of the various episodes, the trio witnesses a corrida, during which the torreador is impaled by the raging bull; the consumption of blood, lacerated meat, and torrid heat is so intense that it makes Simone and the narrator rush to the dung-smelling stalls underneath the bleachers and copulate wildly; thereafter Simone is served a plate with the whitish testes of the sacrificed bull. The apotheosis is reached in the final scene, which takes place in the cathedral of Santa Caridad, where the three ambush a weak-willed priest, Don Aminado, and make him the prey of a deadly joust—a symbolic corrida, in which this time the Church, by proxy of the priest, is the frenzied bull harassed by the acephalic matador, impersonated by the subversive trio. The young, handsome Don Aminado is baited in the confessional by Simone, who rises to masturbate in his face; utterly stupefied, the priest is subsequently dragged in the sacristy, where Sir Edmond first makes him urinate in a ciborium, and therefrom forces him to drink his own urine. Then, while the narrator sodomizes her, Simone proceeds to masturbate Aminado’s “fat, rosy rod” until, “bawling like a pig being slaughtered,” he ejaculates on the eucharistic bread. Sir Edmond and the narrator finally immobilize their victim, allowing Simone to straddle and ride him; speedily, she drives the cleric to the climax, and chokes him to death while he orgasms. That done, Simone, moist and ecstatic, collapses next to the priest’s cadaver, and the narrator, wanting to violate her in turn, is suddenly immobilized by the “love” he feels for the woman and by “the death of the unnamable.” In the spur of the moment, he confesses: “I have never been so happy.” An eye of the priest is eventually gouged; it finds itself juggled and then clasped between the sucking navels of the lovers as they resume intercourse, before being swallowed by Simone’s vagina.⁷⁴

Admittedly, a classic.

Bataille would repeatedly attempt to emulate Sade, making his porn either mystical with, say, *Madame Edwarda* (1937), or crass in *Le Mort* (1943),⁷⁵ but to little avail. As a *romancier* (of smut or else), hard as he (and Penguin) tried, he never quite made the cut.

Le mort (The Dead), comments Bataille's biographer, is the "most obscene" of his narratives, "but also the most austere and the most holy."⁷⁶ *Le mort* is a fractured tale of a woman, Marie. After an encounter with death on a stormy, dreary evening, Marie walks out of the house, feverish and naked under her raincoat, and wanders into an inn—to slather herself as muck on the brink of the abyss. In the inn she finds the devil in the guise of an oversexed dwarf—the count—a lusty youth, Pierrot, and a chorus of barflies led by a stodgy patroness. After the threesome of Marie-Pierrot-the Count is finished with a preliminary crossfire of booze shots, ejaculation, and jets of urine, Marie demands to be "fucked" ("baise-moi") by Pierrot. The chorus lays her on the table, spreads her legs, and "overcome by the tumult of the [ensuing] body-to-body, of incredible violence," watches, breathing heavily. "The scene," narrated Bataille, "in its slowness, reminded of the slaughter of a pig, or the interment of a god." Pierrot achieves the sacrifice in a slobbered roar, while Mary "answers him with a spasm of death." Thereafter, Marie looks at the count and vomits.

The devil, said Mary, I shit before the devil!" . . . She squatted and shat on the vomit.⁷⁷

In *Madame Edwarda*—the other novels are truly not worth the mention—similar themes are broached. *Madame Edwarda* is the madam of a whorehouse—the goddess-vestal of Bataille's temple. To the drunken narrator one day she exposes the folds of her vagina with methodical care.

From a sitting position, she kept a leg up and spread out: so as to widen the slit more comfortably, she pulled the flesh with both hands. Thus the "tatters" (*les guenilles*) of Edwarda stared at me, hairy and pink, full of life like a repugnant octopus.⁷⁸

The tumescent and blushing carnality of her genitals beckon like the gaping grimace of a gangrened sore. The pace and thoroughness of the exhibit is such that the patron, stammering, questions Edwarda's intent. She replies: "You see, I am GOD." In the fashion of Christ presenting to view his stigmata to the doubting apostle, Edwarda bids the narrator touch and kiss the "festering wound" (*la vive plate*).⁷⁹ He complies and realizes: "She was black, wholly, simple, anguishlike like a hole. [. . .] I then knew that she hadn't lied [. . .], that she was God."⁸⁰ And here is the pointed exegesis of Bataille's biographer: "Edwarda knows, and what she knows is duly God's: what only God would know if he knew but he doesn't know, and that is why he doesn't exist. What a prostitute knows God ignores and that is why only a prostitute is holy when God is, in fact, a farce. If he knew he'd die. [. . .] He'd be unmasks. Edwarda is not only an exceeding animality. [. . .] She is GOD revealed DEAD."⁸¹

This a variation on the theodicean theme of the impossibility of reconciling the two faces of sacredness: on the one hand, foulness (the profane), symbolized in this Bataillean bas-relief by the carnose purulence of human genitals; and, on the other, purity, represented instead by compassion and all art animated by Olympian ideals. In the production of Bataille, this uncouth coexistence in Man of ideal aspiration and the tumultuous swarming of vermin—which is backed by all that deep cosmos of rage, murder, defilement, and decay—ushers in these lurid aporias, whose game of illusory perspective is always the same. We have seen the sketch of a God dreaming of being a man eaten by bugs, metamorphosing then into these disgusting insects—for are these not God's creatures themselves?—to be annihilated by the same anguished man. And this man, in turn, is supposedly fashioned by a God, and designed by God also to experience anguish, which, God, however, because He is by definition imperturbable, cannot Himself feel, if not, that is, by incarnating into his creation (man). And when God does, He becomes one with despairing solitude. Given that such could not have been one of creation's anticipated sentiments, God, through the anguished man, discovers that there can be no benevolent, all-seeing God. Likewise in the cameo of *Madame Edwarda*; if God were the God of physics and filial piety, how could he spare the energy to conceive something as unfathomable as a vulva, which, aside from its comprehensible generative function, truly exudes power and awe on the strength of its being sacred harlotry's pyx of erotic squander? Again, if God the geometer were to embody Himself into the madam of a bordello, He would experience through her the filth of the orgy, which could never have been one of the archetypal wishes of the mathematician-God, and which proves therefore that in this world of ours, a wholesome, omniscient God is an impossibility. For Bataille, what is left is anguish, base matter, emptied sand, the sacred mystery of eroticism, and neither "high" nor "low." All of which clues imaginatively combined, yielded the allegory of the headless monster—the mannequin of dirt, bowels, motion, and commotion traversed by laughter in the dead-end of the black of night.

Aside from the "sulfur" of his poor novels, eroticism is nonetheless a fundamental component in the economy of Bataille's sociological theory of power, which is the centerpiece of his opus. From Sade, as we saw, Bataille derived the crucial notion of *sovereignty*, which he treated like an excrescence, a physiological throwback to a time when the sentiment of destruction and ruin was a longing clearly present to the conscience of men. "But sovereignty," he added, "is nonetheless [. . .] sin. No, it is the power to sin, without the sentiment of having missed the objective, or it is itself the missing turned into the objective."⁸² Sovereignty is an ancestral recollection of our divine desire to set the world aflame, gratuitously, without expected return, without utility.⁸³ It is that particular mood that lifts our gaze beyond the conventional categories of good and evil. Sovereign beings move with the convulsive flow, taking life as she naturally shows herself. The knight possessed of a "sovereign sensitivity" is unafraid of pain or misfortune—he wishes, instead, to stare both in the face, and to live up to

them, free of rational restraint like an animal, careless of the morrow, and living only in the present.⁸⁴

The impulse of the sovereign man makes him a murderer [. . .] Murder is not the sole means to recover the sovereign way, but sovereignty demands the force to rape; [. . .] it also calls for the risk of death [. . .]. The sovereign is the one who *is*; as if death were not. And he is even the one who does not die, for he dies but to be reborn. [. . .] Sovereignty is essentially the refusal of embracing the limits, which the fear of death enjoins us to respect in order to ensure, under the auspices of a laborious peace, the life of individuals.⁸⁵

For Bataille, the trial of the modern epoch is to repossess the black sacred, and that, he believed, can only be achieved by a ritual embrace of what our minds, conditioned by tradition, consider revolting, disgusting, repulsive, horrifying. The leap into darkness may be accompanied by vertigo and nausea—think of the spectators breathing heavily in *Le mort*—but that very giddiness, said Bataille, is the incontrovertible sign that we are trespassing in the methodical and tangible realm of “evil,” with its sacrifices, processions, incantations, liturgies, and *active* principles. Rot, decomposition, stench, are attributes of death, which is one such principle that must be espoused in order to initiate the inner experience, as intimated by the program of *L'Acéphale*. “Laughter, tears, poetry, tragedy, comedy, play, anger, drunkenness, the ecstasy of dance, music, combat, the funereal horror, the charm of childhood, the sacred, the divine and the diabolical, eroticism (violent or delicate, cerebral or vicious), beauty, fright, disgust,”⁸⁶ “dead flies, blood, menstrual blood,”⁸⁷ spit, shit, muck, scum, sweat, and maggots are all divine secretions of the “sacred impure” that lives with and in us, and beckons to us in our ever more frequent moments of panic and fear.

Of all sovereign forms, *eroticism* was for Bataille possibly the most important.⁸⁸ Unlike sex, eroticism is “diabolical.”⁸⁹ As sexual play severed from possession (of the spouse) and procreation (e.g., the fixation with sodomy), eroticism is a chief symbol of loss and dissipation (of sexual energy and fluids); a pure act of perdition, an expenditure of force demanding and expecting no remuneration other than a rapturous wish to lose oneself in ecstasy. Hence the religious connection between death and eroticism, the latter mimicking in a brief span the crescendo and annulling culmination of the other.

Sexuality and death are but the climactic moments of a feast that nature celebrates with the inexhaustible multitude of beings, one and the other understanding the sense of unlimited squander, wherewith nature requites the desire to last, which belongs to every being.⁹⁰

Hence the accord between horror and desire, “which gives to the sacred world its paradoxical character.” The object of sacred smut is “fetid, gluey and boundless, swarming with life and symbolizing death.” “If our desire had not so much trouble overcoming our undeniable repugnance, we wouldn’t have thought it so strong.”⁹¹

Prostitution, erotic vocabulary, the inevitable locus of sexuality and of filthiness still make the world of love a world of forfeiture (*déchéance*) and of death. We experience real happiness only when we expend vainly; we always want to be sure of the uselessness of our expense, to feel as remote as possible from a world of seriousness, for which the growth of resources is the rule. [. . .] We want to be the opposite of such a realm: there is commonly in eroticism a movement of hatred, a movement of treason. That is why it is tied to anguish, and why, in return, when hatred becomes powerlessness, and treason failure, the erotic element is risible.⁹²

Here Bataille isolated the subversive nature of eroticism, its rebellious character. The potential for perennial rebellion issues from the sexual fount of voluptuous energy of which women, as Sade had explicitly acknowledged, appear to be the privileged, sacred vessels—for example, the sex of Madame Edwarda as God. Hence the determination of forbidding devoutness (e.g., Islam) to keep woman under strict surveillance—a power wire to insulate cautiously with the *hijab* (the veil) and male stewardship. Erotic dissipation is, as known, most arousing if twined with violence; it seems most authentic then. That is why, for instance, much pornography stages the constant reenactment of a collective rape, which features a feminine prey as a hub fueling the raging thirst of masculine spokes; the suggestion of brutality and agony has to become ever more pronounced for the viewer to get off. Violence, said Bataille, frightens, but fascinates.⁹³ He warned, however, that if such a performance is deprived of its hating, violent sentiment, of its vertiginous power to disorient the senses and to stab prudes in the chest, the attempt founders in ridicule, and the energy flows out of it, echoed by mocking laughter: the porn is cheap.

Bataille stated that he always wanted “to overturn everything.” To overturn is to break the taboo. And the taboos are the interdictions planted in the course of history by the traditional God. Bataille made us believe that he had rid himself of the cumbersome, taboo-making godhead by tossing it into the trash can of profanity along with rational pretense (discourse). His claim, however, was no more convincing than that of his pious opponents, who pretend to have reserved successfully the same treatment to Satan, because Bataille wrote indeed that the attraction of transgression is that “*it lifts the interdiction without suppressing it.*”⁹⁴

The truth of the interdiction is the key to our human attitude. [. . .] We feel, at the moment of transgression, the anguish without which the interdiction would not exist: it is the experience of sin. [. . .] It is *religious* sensitivity, which always ties tightly desire to fright, intense pleasure and anguish.⁹⁵

Thus, if transgression is the “expected complement”⁹⁶ of the forbidden, in other words, if one cannot be without the other, Bataille was in fact admitting that the pleasure to surrender to the “meditated cruelty” of the monstrous archons would not exist without there being, say, Jehovah/Zeus/Christ imposing the taboo in the first place. Bataille needed the One no less than the Evil One. Bataille did not seem to desire the resurrection of the Aztec regime after all (unrealistic, indeed): like a virus, his project rather felt designed to infect a

traditional society, which is erected upon taboos, with the exclusive mission to overturn and subvert its entire system of prohibition. And this is a difference of some import, which qualifies his *work essentially as one of intellectual destabilization*, rather than unqualified matriarchal/Dionysian revival. It is no wonder that Foucault's frustrated followers have so often lamented the inconclusiveness and irresoluteness of his politics of transgression, which does not contemplate emancipation from the system.

So God is not dead after all; it's alive and kicking and forbidding, as always. Yet, in spite of this, Bataille appeared to believe that there would be still much time and room for impunity. Undaunted, and still pessimistically hopeful, he invited everyone to expose his life to *danger*,⁹⁷ exhausting forces and resources through erotic activity, especially its foul manifestations, such as the orgy, which derived from "fundamental violence," as he characterized it, its "calm and majestic character."⁹⁸ And for the time being, Christianity—this inveterate enemy of transgression and eroticism—may be held in check.

Bataille explained his early seduction: when Christianity was itself a movement of revolt, it attempted to suck the whole of demoniac brutality into the body of the redeemer, and build thereby a vision *overcoming entirely* the madness of violence by inverting its charge—that is, from the state of perennial war to the kingdom of meekness. "There is something sublime and fascinating in this dream," he wrote.⁹⁹ Christ valued "the poor, the pariahs, the foul ones"; he threw himself "into play" as the defender of criminals, indeed, allowing the authorities to treat himself like one. He thus identified with the sacred of the "left"—the impure side.¹⁰⁰ And he ultimately communed with God through the paroxysm of evil, which is the torturing agony on the cross. "Communication amongst beings," Bataille concluded once more, "is ensured by evil."¹⁰¹ And the final truth is that it was "humanity" itself, as the mobs of Palestine, that tormented Christ and clamored to see him die; the throng, yet again, demanded that the king-son be put to death. This, for Bataille, is the sacred unfolding of "tragedy." And tragedy, in turn, demands that we identify with the criminals and not with the victim, however shocking and harrowing his torment may be.

Christianity proposes [to man] to identify himself with the victim, to the slain king. It is the Christian solution that has hitherto carried the day. But this whole movement takes place in a world that is at variance with it.¹⁰²

Bataille saw Christianity as a dream besieged, with greatly diminished powers of attraction and persuasion, despite its bloody worship of martyrdom and the stories of Jesus' gentle heroism.

In synthesis, Bataille's Dionysian challenge consists in finding means through which sovereign violence may find a role to play in a world that the once-promising dream of Catholicism has gradually surrendered to Liberal power. This concern with religious subversion, which is directly tied to the *viral* objective of his project, may be further evinced from Bataille's insistence on the dual nature of modern societies. That is, he insisted on their hosting within their outwardly

benevolent, humane structure of “human” rights and “democratic,” civilized deportment an utterly alien core of brutality, turpitude, and hate. Bataille recognized the epitome of this spiritual schizophrenia in the cliché of the family man: an angel of gentility by day, and a fiend wallowing in debauch by night—a “civilized barbarian.”¹⁰³ A description applicable, by the bye, to Bataille himself, and Sade, of course. The lasting testament of Sade, for Bataille, is to have reminded the world that violence was the aboriginal affair of humanity, and that from the moment that men ceased to voice this sovereign desire to *destroy* they began to live *mendaciously*; Sade uncovered the lie.¹⁰⁴ He uncovered the fact that “human life is made of two heterogeneous parts that never join. One of reason, whose sense is given by useful ends [. . .]: it is this part that appears to the conscience. The other is sovereign: on the occasion, it takes shape as a perturbation of the former, it is obscure, or rather if it is luminous, it blinds; it thus evades by all manners conscious perception.”¹⁰⁵

So, once the origin of the desire to transgress (as well as to rape, ejaculate “sovereignly,” kill, sacrifice, and destroy) has been found in a substratum of base and monstrous matter revealed to the conscience by the inner experience, what remains to be done is to voice this call from the darkness, *not* as the proud cry of a Liberal libertine soloist—as Sade had done—but as the impersonal tongue spoken by a community of beings united by the selfsame spiritual, Dionysian communion under the sign of transgression.

The sacred [. . .] is essentially communication, it is contagion. There is sacredness when, at a given moment, something is being unleashed which should absolutely be stopped but cannot be, and which is going to destroy—something which risks of troubling the constituted order. [. . .] Profanity, it seems to me, corresponds exactly to reason [. . .]; and reason is essentially the account that introduces the notion of equality.¹⁰⁶

“Being,” Bataille specified, “is never *I alone*, it is always *I and my fellow creatures*.¹⁰⁷

The emblem and symbol of Bataille’s sovereign eroticism is the knight of the French renaissance Gilles de Rais (1404–1440). Gilles De Rais, Lord of Machecoul, is an historical personage: the martial prowess of this nobleman was so extraordinary that by age twenty-five, he had returned to his castle acclaimed as a glorious *maréchal de France* after having liberated the city of Orléans with his companion-in-arms, Joan of Arc. Upon his elevation, observed Bataille, he appeared headed toward an “incomparable destiny.”¹⁰⁸ But, then, inexplicably, he went astray. Possibly the wilderness of war had taken on him a terrible vengeance. Suddenly de Rais found himself burning with the “necessity to shine.” It overtook him like “vertigo”: “he [could not] resist the impulse to dazzle, he [had to] subvert by way of an incomparable splendor.”¹⁰⁹ He began to lavish his immense fortune, without rhyme or reason, doggedly, chasing as it were his own complete “ruin.”¹¹⁰ “Capable of vile cruelties,” which he learnt to inflict well in the carnage of war, he was “incapable of calculation.”¹¹¹ To an admiring Bataille, Gilles de Rais was the purest expression of sovereignty, of sacrality. He squandered, he did

not reckon or throwe. In everything he would do, Gilles de Rais abjured Reason, which, in Bataille's inverted system of worship, is *profanity*. "The realm of *reason*," he wrote, is the realm of "the *identity of things*, of duration, of calculation,"¹¹² whereas sovereign captains are born to unreason, to de-cumulate, to burn, fast, in a timeless bout of fury and disappear in the outburst. While blasting his riches as the most munificent of chieftains, Gilles de Rais began, with the complicity of a handful of loyal retainers, to kidnap village boys, whom he would kill, dismember, and decapitate after having tortured and raped them.

Doubtless [Gilles de Rais] sat on the stomach of the victim, masturbating, and dispersed on the moribund the semen of life; what mattered to him was less the sexual enjoyment than witnessing death at work. He loved to watch: he had the bodies opened, a throat slit, the limbs dissevered, he loved to see blood.¹¹³

Swine-drunk and armed with a "glaive vulgarly named Braquemard," Gilles incised the vein in the neck of his preys, and relishing the violence of the squirming blood, he strove to mesh the ejaculation with the death spasms of the boys. The heads he would sever from the trunks, and elect "the most beautiful" of such skulls, which he would kiss. Thereafter, nonplussed, drained by the night of nonsense, the sire of Rais collapsed to the floor. "The servants tidied up the halls, washed off the blood, and while the master slept, they burnt the bodies in the fire-side."¹¹⁴ Because he antagonized a powerful notable of the Church, and because the (true) rumor spread in the county that he had been strenuously attempting to conjure up Satan—who did not bother, however, to manifest himself to the devout Gilles—he came under the scrutiny of the feudal judicature. De Rais was tried and condemned rather for these two offenses than for the sexual murders, whose authorship and details did indeed surface during the proceedings of the trial. Overcome with grief, Gilles de Rais thrust himself at the mercy of the authorities imploring as well the forgiveness of the mob. In delirious séances of guilty cries, tears, and the fascinated commiseration of the villagers, this very plebs—deeply moved and inclining toward its sympathetic affinity for the criminal—granted to Gilles a symbolic acquittance, as if passing judgment in its own popular tribunal. Gilles de Rais was burnt at the stake at age thirty-five.

Two years before his death, Bataille could perfectly canvass this exceptional episode within the innovative architecture of his "theopathy." First, Bataille saw a confirmation of his theory in the singular and chance manifestation of these "dominating, seductive forces," whose "nobility possesses the sense of a violence" that knows no bounds.¹¹⁵ This force is a reflection of that peculiar virtue, which in French goes under the name of *désinvolture*. Its English translation, "off-handedness" ("ease" or "coolness"), doesn't quite capture the quality of this sovereign attitude.

This man is threatened by a rapid ruin, ceaselessly does he hover on the verge of remorse, he walks over the abyss: he departs himself nonetheless with ease (*il n'en a pas moins ce mouvement désinvolte*), availing himself of this incongruous confidence, which renders catastrophe inevitable.¹¹⁶

Ernst Jünger—whom Bataille admired, and whose religious outlook is, indeed, remarkably similar to his (Jünger's opus will be dealt with in chapter 8)—froze the mood in an axiom: “*désinvolture* is the innocence of power—It is a countenance of the higher nature, adorning the free man, who, unfettered, shifts around in the costume God has rented him out.”¹¹⁷

Second, Bataille acknowledged with silent approval the overall sovereign zeitgeist of the feudal, premodern era: of an epoch, that is, that found far more to reprobate in the evocation of the Devil, or, worse, in the affront of a sovereign prince of the Church, than in the orgiastic butchery of a score of ragtag adolescents (of what worth were these, wonders Bataille's biographer, “compared with the impressive fortune of the Lord of Machecoul?”).¹¹⁸

The human kind was in the eyes of Gilles but an element of voluptuous trouble.¹¹⁹

Third, the striking savagery of the populace, which was found cheering for the monster, is a phenomenon, Bataille remarked, *not at all* aberrant or “contrary to Christianity of the truest sort, which itself has always been a terrifying cult!” Indeed, Bataille insisted, religion has been for most of its life violence and blood, and, as a rule, the loose body of the believers has never been truly afraid of disorders as troubling as those incarnated by the likes of Gilles de Rais. Bataille mused: “Perhaps, deep down, couldn't Christianity be the exigency of crime, the exigency of a horror, which, in a sense, it needs in order to be its forgiveness? [. . .] Without the extreme violence that is offered to us in the crimes of a sire de Rais, could we understand Christianity?”¹²⁰

Fourth and last, the economics of crime: as Bataille noted, “the decline of Gilles de Rais” featured “certain aspects of funereal magnificence. This thug,” Bataille continued, “who missed the game of war, found himself needful of a compensation. He seemed to have found it in the game of ostentatious expenditure.”¹²¹ For to squander and wield power with innocence—that is, impunity—is the sovereign privilege of the *désinvolte* knight: it is thus he, and he alone, that makes war; consequently it is everybody else's duty to forage these lords with the food and cuirasses they need for the holocaust to be consummated. In brief, the unprivileged, propertyless masses *work* while the debauched paladins squander.¹²² Nowadays, it takes indeed an institutional machine of formidable complexity to sustain likewise the madness of techno-wars: our very own Liberal *economy*.

Bataille's fundamental reflection on “ostentatious expenditure” affords his entire vision a connection to the fundamental question of political economy, which investigates what uses a society makes of its surplus. This is the theme of the next section. In this instance, Bataille correctly understood that the holocaust and the profanity (sacrality, to him) of war, prostitution, the maldistributed property of oligarchic regimes, and seigniorial festive extravagances are all economic manifestations observable within communities pervaded by the same spiritual makeup: that is, by a sovereign, *barbarous animus*. In this sense, Bataille effected a significant methodological shift vis-à-vis the conventional approach of the social sciences. He showed that it is only by conducting a preliminary

analysis of a society's religious foundations that a realistic account of its economics may be provided.

Three are the spheres of social activity: the spiritual, the economic, and the political; now that the first (the spirituality of worship and eroticism) has been detailed, there remains to see how Bataille gave expression to his peculiar conception of "community" through economic and political organization. To these two domains of collective action the following sections are respectively devoted.

Expenditure

Bataille once described his thinking "as a prostitute undressing."¹²³ The prostitute is the metaphorical crossroads of Bataille's project, it is the busy intersection of his recurrent thoughts on forfeiture. The prostitute is a first emanation of erotic power, but of an eroticism that vests itself of economic valence: the pleasure is to be purchased. Prostitution works to erase the mutual and *exclusive* attraction between subjects, which according to orthodox religion, is the precondition leading to the bond of matrimony, conjugal passion, and procreation. "If the need to love and of losing oneself is stronger than the worry to find each other," Bataille deduced, "there is no other issue than laceration, and the perversions of tumultuous passion." For he thought that "lovers seek an annihilation without measure in a violent expenditure in which the possession of a new woman or a new man is but the pretext for an expenditure even more annihilating."¹²⁴

The "notion of expenditure" (*dépense*) is one of Bataille's most famous constructs. It is the direct application of his conception of erotic activity to the field of economics. And it begins with a direct attack upon the utilitarian principles of Liberal economics. Bataille takes exception, and rightly so, to modern economics' persevering refusal to acknowledge the fundamental role that *dissipation* plays in economic activity. In principle, Liberal economists conceive the economic sphere as one consisting of investment, production, and consumption. All their pseudo-theorems are devised to rationalize the prevailing distribution of wealth, which, notoriously, is always skewed, more or less obscenely, in favor of the elite—that restricted nucleus of financial, bureaucratic, and military interests commanding a vastly disproportionate share of a nation's wealth. In the political economists' partisan representation of the self-regulating market system, poverty is regarded as an epiphenomenon, and taxes are accounted as something of a nuisance with no significant impact on welfare, other than providing for the state's basic commodities (laws, security, and defense).

There exists another tradition of political economy, rooted in anthropological analysis and featuring some of the most sophisticated economists of modernity (e.g., Thorstein Veblen, Marcel Mauss, Karl Polanyi, and Rudolf Steiner), which analyzes economics from a vantage point that is the obverse of that of classical Liberal economics. Instead of considering economics, as the Liberals do, the problem of managing efficiently *resources that are assumed to be scarce*, the other school—let us call it "the political economy of the gift"—observes that resources are not scarce but bountiful, and that the economic problem arising from such

abundance (i.e., the surplus), *is how best to employ this miraculous gift*—the joint bounty of Nature and human ingenuity. The economics of Bataille represents, in a sense, the dark complement to the economy of the gift. Unlike the other exponents of this school, whose approach he nonetheless shared, Bataille was not interested in the *benevolent* uses of the surplus, but rather in its employment within those communities that happened to find themselves under the spiritual drift of violent Dionysian worship. Barbarous civilization have made singular use of their surpluses, indeed: they have *squandered* unspeakable amounts of resources in pageantry, sacrifice, monumental splendor, and war. It is this aspect of the gift economy that enthralled Bataille: the financing of sovereign waste and religious rage—this aspect alone; not the wholesome gifting to the arts and sciences, and least of all the Liberals' utilitarian preoccupation with thrift and capital accumulation, which he loathed as “a miserable conception.”¹²⁵ What Bataille found truly extraordinary in the process of economic creation is not the accumulation and the immense technological resources that have been immobilized for the sake of production so much as the *uses* that are made of this production in excess. And, clearly, this is a problem of metaphysical magnitude: the distribution of the excess reveals the “soul” of the community under observation.

All in all, a society always produces more than is necessary to its sustenance, it disposes of an excess. It is precisely the usage it makes of [such an excess] that determines [its physiognomy]: the surplus is the cause of the agitation, of the structural changes of so much history. And growth itself has many forms each of which, in the long term, hits upon some limit. Contrasted, demographic growth turns military [. . .]: having reached the military limit, the surplus assumes the sumptuary forms of religion, from which derive games and spectacles, or the personal [ostentation] of luxury.¹²⁶

Through the allocation of the surplus (be it to war, instruction, sanitation, art, etc.), one may detect whether a given collectivity prays to Aztec divinities, Apollinian ones, an uncouth mix of both, other deities, or none at all: this is a fascinating and difficult investigation, which, despite the censorship imposed by the Liberal school of political economy against opposing views, has yielded some remarkable studies, including Bataille's, and which presently stands as possibly the only truthful, interdisciplinary, and insightful kind of economic analysis.

What is, then, “expenditure?” “Luxury,” replied Bataille, “mourning, wars, cults, monumental and sumptuary construction, games, spectacles, the arts and perverse sexual activity (that is to say diverted from genital finality) represent as many activities that [. . .] have their end in themselves.” Decorative extravagance, the jewelry and gaudy apparel of prostitutes, and sodomy are all forms of dissipate expense expecting no counterpart. “All production of sacred things [i.e., sacrifice]—demands a bloody squander of men and beasts.”¹²⁷ This is Bataille's notion of “creation by way of loss”: in essence, an earmarking of human, earthly, and animal life for the celebration of the monstrous and obscene archons. What of misery, poverty? Why, Bataille legitimately wondered, wasn't the surplus

throughout the ages systematically devoted to fixing distributional imbalances? Why was there always in man's world tremendous waste existing side by side with utter wretchedness? The answer, said Bataille, is to be found again in the human collective's archetypal propensity to squander sovereignly—for show, ostentation, rank, pleasure, hate, or whim. No matter how much the sight of misery might offend our sensitivities, the urge to blast resources in the air, giving in to our erotic disposition, appears to have been always, historically, the stronger impulse—in truth, we happened to have lived hitherto like the monsters of Sade's novels.¹²⁸ There are cathedrals in the desert, skyscrapers in the ghettos, and mass sacrifices in times of "peace": Bataille's argument appears unassailable.

Specifically, his inspiration for these economic reflections was Marcel Mauss's famous 1925 *Essai sur le don* (published in English as *The Gift*), in which the French anthropologist dwelt on the power of unrequited donation. Munificence, as Mauss observed, gave rise to the so-called economics of the potlatch, which governed, in two notable instances, the practices of the Pacific islanders and of America's natives. Mauss followed the tokens of gifting, as they circulated among the sister tribes in its pristine form, spurring growth and strengthening goodwill along the chain of exchange. Liberal textbooks always begin by teaching that modern monetary regimes were preceded by a barter economy. But that is false. Mauss showed how by an act of donation made by one tribal chieftain to another, and passed on from the latter to yet another neighbor, a web of promises came to link the islands of the archipelago: a circle was formed along which the offering journeyed endlessly effacing as it went the notion of origin or destination, and cementing thereby the communal bond of the participant isles. The gift did not have to be, and should not have been, mutual; it had to be given away, and in time, through the circle, it would have assuredly returned in other form, often greatly magnified by a game of emulation, which triggered a dynamics of munificent growth. The gift is the sacred manifestation of economic exchange and, as such, Mauss revered it as the vestigial analogue of the Greek, Apollinian liturgy (*leitourgia*: the obligation of the rich to fund the *polis*'s arts and defense), the Buddhist and Christian alms, the Jubilee of the Old Testament, and the Islamic *zakat* (one of the five pillars of the faith). As religious offering, contribution to science, and streamlining of excessive wealth concentration, the gift, by perpetuating the life of the all communities, renews the life of our race.

Of the stories told by Mauss, Bataille lingered exclusively on the perverse variants of the gifting cycle. He relished those accounts of clan leaders competing with one another in an orgy of squander of life and wealth to affirm their *status*. As always, Bataille was concerned with the realm of the chthonic, not that of the Apollinian gods, whose taboos he urged to transgress. His objective in this regard was twofold: to prove that the excess exhausts itself on a one-way street, and to undermine the traditional conception that the surplus regenerates itself virtuously along a circular process of gifting.

For the religious feeling, be it Apollinian or Dionysian, Bataille stated that "every creation springs from abundance." "The Gods create out of an excess of power, an overflow of energy. Creation is accompanied by a surplus of ontological

substance.”¹²⁹ What to do with this overflow of Being? “The ultimate question for man,” according to Bataille, was the following: “Being is an effect constantly solicited in two directions: one leads to the formation of durable ordinances and of conquering forces; the other leads by means of the expenditure of force and excess to destruction and death.”¹³⁰ In this dichotomy we find the standard Bataillean schema positing the “true” sacred Dionysian-Aphrodisitic forces of dissipation vis-à-vis the profane power of discourse and accumulation (the God of the Christians and the bourgeois regime of reason). The latter is the world of utility, and *work*, the former is the sovereign sphere of idleness, war, eroticism, leisure, and sacrifice.

The leisure, which affords prostitution, is not the same thing as beauty; often beauty coexists with work, ugliness with leisure. But never is work propitious to beauty, whose very meaning is to escape from overwhelming constraints. A beautiful body, a beautiful face have the sense of beauty if the utility which they represent has in no manner altered them, if they cannot warrant the idea of an existence devoted to serving.¹³¹

In his commentary on the trial of Gilles de Rais, Bataille had similarly argued that “for the majority of mankind it is necessary to work, so as to allow the privileged ones to play, even to play, sometimes, the game of killing one another.” The sweat pouring down the brow of the masses is in the eyes of the sovereign individual but the effort preceding *play*. “We tend to forget this often,” Bataille pressed on, “but the principle of nobility itself, what it is in its essence, is the refusal to suffer the degradation, the forfeiture, which is the inevitable effect of [manual] work! In a fundamental manner, for the society of yesteryear, work is shameful.”¹³²

A quarter of a century before the publication of Mauss’s essay, Thorstein Veblen had already fully developed in his masterpiece *The Theory of the Leisure Class* the late Bataillean notion of “dépense,” by offering a detailed description of “wasteful expenditure” (or “conspicuous consumption”) under the influence of what the Norwegian-American social scientist called the *barbarian spirit*.

But the French, then, did not read English.

As known, Veblen imputed all noxious waste, war, games, spectacles, ritual of prevarication, outlandish luxurious dissipation, and seemingly inexplicable, absurd fashion styles to the survival of archaic, that is, barbarous traits in a modern machine-driven society.¹³³ More than thirty years before Bataille, Veblen had written about the decisive transition from the Demetrian tutelary stage of husbandry and tillage to the masculine “predatory culture” of war and its economic pendant, slavery. What factors had been responsible for this particular transition, Veblen, and even Bataille, did not precisely know, though both authors averred that the shift has signaled a “spiritual difference.”¹³⁴ “Until the advent of war and slavery,” Bataille wrote, “the embryonic civilization rested upon the activity of freemen, essentially equal. But slavery was born of war.”¹³⁵ Likewise, Veblen spoke in connection to this age of “primitive technology” of “masterless men”

and “group solidarity.”¹³⁶ But with the coming of the predatory warriors, labor had become “irksome.”¹³⁷

Then modern man entered the stage. Veblen portrayed him as a refined tool-maker, who transferred his archaic, emulative bent—including the propensity to fight and kill—to the acquisition of wealth, an excess of which, thanks to the technological shift, was presently available for the taking. Bataille, on the other hand, tinting the account with his customary morosity, narrated that man, “by abandoning his original simplicity, chose the doomed path of war.” From war was issued slavery, which eventually begot prostitution.¹³⁸ Both authors agreed that the primal drive of man in a social environment is his *desire for standing, for status*. This is a corroborated finding of anthropological investigation and it lies at the foundation of the political economy of the gift. Karl Polanyi gave it a definitive formulation in his classic, *The Great Transformation*. Unlike the biased myths of Liberalism—which were first articulated by thinkers such as Smith, Hobbes, and Rousseau—the political economy of the gift rests, instead, on the fundamental and *realistic* assumption that the first element of collective interaction is *the individual's the yearning for recognition*. The savage state of society, Polanyi objected, was characterized by neither the pursuit of self-interest nor benevolent communism, nor the state of war of man against man.¹³⁹

A Russian Hegelian named Alexander Kojève shared this conviction as well. He had moved from analogous premises in order to craft a singular interpretation of German idealism. This Russian émigré would make a name for himself in the intellectual Paris of the thirties, where his courses on Hegel at the Sorbonne came to be attended by a devout coterie, which included Bataille himself. Kojève's work would also become a fount of inspiration to a fringe of *conservative* scholars headed in America by another émigré, Leo Strauss. This interesting junction would give rise to a whole different filiation in the field of postmodernism. As a further installment of our story, it will be dealt with in a separate chapter (chapter 8).

When *squander* is the theme being broached, it is inevitably of *gods* that one will soon have to speak. A Demetrian—egalitarian, feminist, and communist—yet afflicted by a disdain for jocose animism and a passion for machines, Veblen could not but employ terms such as “spirit” or “genius” when it came to identifying the prime engines of these squandering moods. Interestingly, he, like Bataille, had no liking whatever for the “vengeful God of the Book” (e.g., Jehovah or Allah), which he classified with no afterthought as one the highest and most repulsive forms of barbarism. However, if exposed to the anatomical mysteries of Dionysism, and of Bataille's and Sade's sovereign principle, Veblen would have in all likelihood found himself speechless. This son of immigrant Scandinavians believed passionately in the ethic of workmanship, in the elegance and truth of science, in aesthetic linearity, and in “the fullness of life.” To him, more than distasteful, Bataille would have been utterly unfathomable. Veblen was the most genial social scientist of the modern era (he will resurface in chapters 7 and 9), but, like all Victorians, he did not believe in the Devil: Satan and the

White Goddess could only have been the primitive expression of superstitious, “inchoate animism.”

As we saw and shall have occasion to reiterate, Bataille did not acknowledge the existence of barbarian gods but only of Dionysian power on the one hand, and of a modern degenerate, rational usurpation of this *primordial, wild power* on the other. Sovereignty *is* barbarism. When a whole civilization is constructed on the basis of such usurpation of “primordial power,” the result, so thought Bataille, *is the foundation of modern society itself*: God and bureaucracy are shoved together into this category. Because Veblen waged his scholarly battle in the name of universal compassion, workmanship, equality, peace, and the conservation of life, his vision is irreconcilable with that of Bataille; however, one could still say that Bataille completed the Veblenian investigation by studying the economics of the monstrous archons, which Veblen, out of materialist superstition, had altogether ignored. In this sense, Bataille is Veblen’s sinister double.

“The gift,” Bataille wrote, “is not the only form of potlatch. It is equally possible to defy rivals through spectacular destruction of wealth. It is by the intermediary of this latter form that the potlatch rejoins religious sacrifice, the acts of destruction being theoretically offered to the mythical ancestors of the beneficiaries.” From Mauss’s book Bataille quoted in this connection the example of a chief who, as a savage display of one-upmanship, summoned several slaves from his train and paid homage to a peer by slashing their throats before him.¹⁴⁰ Bataille seemed to find this “offering” far more significant than the chain of gifting per se, and it brought him to *redefine* the matter entirely.

The gift must be considered a loss and thus as a partial destruction: the desire to destroy being in part carried over onto the beneficiary. In the unconscious forms, such as psychoanalysis describes them, it symbolizes excretion, which itself is tied to death, in accordance with the fundamental connection of anal eroticism and sadism.¹⁴¹

By now Bataille’s method is transparent: it consists in tacking traditional sacred symbols, one by one, defiling them, distorting their understanding, and finally proceeding to discard them as the profanities of the bourgeoisie’s “universal pettiness,” thus mixing up deliberately, once again, middle-class feeling with traditional religiousness.¹⁴² Eventually, Bataille would develop the notion of expenditure into the more elaborate theory of the “Accursed Share” (*La part maudite*). In this later, important work, which he considered his most accomplished, he expanded the general idea of dissipation within an articulate description of the power structure involved.

First of all, he distinguished between *heterogeneous* and *homogeneous* behavior. The “heterogeneous”—another concept he borrowed from Sade—is but a synonym of “sovereign”: it is the religious acceptance of man’s composite, dual nature (sweet, and yet, savage), as well as a proud reconciliation with this

spiritual schizophrenia, which is finally upheld and cherished as a fount of inhuman strength. Thus understood, the warrior society of the Aztecs, with its religious performance of the holocaust, is a pure instance of a heterogeneous regime. In contradistinction to the latter stands the “homogeneous” society: that is, the contemporary social organization of the bourgeoisie, with its “ghastly hypocrisy”¹⁴³ and “greed,” whose principle is an all-consuming “fear of death.”¹⁴⁴ Homogeneity is a *caption for a new spiritual force*: in the theory of Bataille it marks the advent of the new mechanical epoch.

The basis of social homogeneity is production. *Homogeneous* society is productive society, that is to say, utilitarian society. All useless implements are excluded, not from society as a whole, but from its *homogeneous* component.¹⁴⁵

Bataille did say it: modernity was built with slave labor. Therefore, production, along with its attendant submenus (saving and investment), is the preoccupation proper of the slave, never of the warrior. It is the former that sweats for the latter. It follows that, today, the mentality of the thrifty, middle class is a servile one.

Industrial wealth, which is presently enjoyed by the world, is the outcome of the millenary toil of the enslaved masses, of the unhappy multitudes.¹⁴⁶

It was with glee that Bataille watched capitalism’s periodic shows of impotence, as when it is cyclically forced to burn the crop in order to salvage profits. This was to him but the miserable treatment that a homogeneous society has in store for the overflow of nature (*le trop-plein*). There just seems to be *too much* around us, Bataille reasoned; and despite the shameless bonfires of wheat and oranges, and the dumping of staples to the bottom of the ocean to prop up prices on the marketplace, there is no resisting the damnation, the surplus, the curse of this exceeding quota, which is inevitably funneled toward orgiastic dissipation. Dionysus and Diaphoene always take their due. Again, Bataille seemed to intimate, one should surrender to this state of affairs.

Resuming his Aztec romance, Bataille wrote that the overflow of men, beasts, crops, food, and life is the effect of the “radiating sun, which expends without compensation.”¹⁴⁷ This is the true gifting, “the incessant prodigality” of the sun: an initial radiation of solar energy required by sacrifice. No virtuous cycle, no circular, cementing growth comes out of it. For Bataille, the excess can only be suppressed with an effusion of blood: thus, the Aztecs had to reciprocate the solar donation by liquidating the “excess population.” And so it generally goes with wars, massacres, and ravages of all kinds. It is in the sad eyes of Bataille the accursed surplus of life that begs, in the final instant, to be annihilated through a blind act of violence. It is an accursed share, a damnation rather than a bounty; it is an excrement, one of those divine secretions that must be hallowed and consumed as an initiatory step in the horrifying cult of the archons. Bataille acknowledged that we are all deeply frightened by this fateful “movement of

dilapidation”; its “consequences are anguishing from the outset,”¹⁴⁸ but there appears to be no escape—no escape from the sacrifice and the suffering. This is the economics of tragedy.

The economic history of modern times is dominated by the epic, but disappointing attempt by ravenous men to wrest from the Earth her wealth. The Earth has been disemboweled, yet from the inside of her stomach, what men have extracted is above all iron and fire, with which they never cease to disembowel one another. [. . .] The Earth-Mother has remained the old chthonic divinity, but with the human multitudes, she has also brought down the lord in the heavens in a never-ending uproar.¹⁴⁹

Published after World War II, *La part maudite* featured at the end a discussion of the Marshall Plan, which, though cryptic, left no doubt as to his (not so secret) intentions and (perverse) expectations. “This achievement,” he wrote slyly of the Marshall Plan, was tied “to the increase of the level of welfare [and] to an earnest repositioning of social existence. [. . .] *Blindly [President] Truman, is today laying the groundwork for the ultimate and secrete apotheosis.*”¹⁵⁰

In other words, Bataille feared the gift, but felt no dread whatever for America’s 1948 imperial plan to attract a devastated Europe in her orbit by way of a very self-interested, and rather paltry, gifting plan, which amounted to 2 percent of the American GDP, less than the annual consumption of alcohol in the United States for 1947. Almost delighted, Bataille seemed to have braced himself for the great U.S. imperial ride, “blindly” set in motion by the Liberal Truman, preparing for the “ultimate secret apotheosis”: a promise of unspeakable carnage, which the new means of industrial production and the atom bomb seemed to guarantee, and which the obscene archons would inevitably take as their accursed due. Dionysus loves the Liberal order, after all. Was Bataille hoping then for the final nuclear holocaust? Who knows.

There is something frightening in the destiny of the human being—something that always stood at the limit of this unbounded nightmare, which has been heralded by ever more modern armament, and by the nuclear bomb.¹⁵¹

Power

Violence, disproportion, delirium, madness, characterize by varying degrees the heterogeneous elements: as persons or as crowds, they manifest themselves actively by breaking the laws of social *homogeneity*. [. . .] *Heterogeneous* reality shocks, with a power unknown and dangerous. It presents itself as a charge, as a value, passing from one object to the other in a more or less arbitrary fashion. [. . .] While the structure of knowledge in a homogeneous society takes the form of science, it is easy to notice that the knowledge of a heterogeneous society, instead, will be discovered in the mystical imagination of the primitives and in the representation of the dream; it points to the structure of the unconscious.¹⁵²

This passage adumbrates Bataille’s theory of power. A true social science concerns itself with the *collective* dynamics of social aggregates, of groups. From this

vantage point, the behavior of individuals is significant so long as it inscribes itself into a *coherent whole*, so long, that is, as one sees in it the singular reflection of a herd mentality. Humans are indeed swayed by forces—of opinion, of religious fervor, of sylvan festivity, of solar euphoria, of martial enthusiasm, and the like. These forces have been far more potent than, *and qualitatively alien from*, the mere instinctual, psychological reflexes that govern our short-range day-to-day activity, and which we think are the alpha and omega of our lifetime's vicissitudes.

There exist sweeping waves of collective organization that set us all in orderly motion with one another, as in a swarm of bees—whose buzzing undulations Bataille addressed¹⁵³—or as in a school of fish.

Is society a Being? Is it an organism? Or is it simply a summation of individuals?¹⁵⁴

As an exoteric front to his secretive brotherhood of the *Acéphable*, Bataille conceived the creation of a scholarly outfit comprising a team of researchers and literati, whose task would be to investigate the theme of social collective movement.¹⁵⁵ He named the enterprise the *Collège of Sociologie*; its curriculum would span a series of seminars to be hosted in a variety of Parisian venues between 1937 and 1939. The programmatic lectures drafted by Bataille for the occasion contain the near totality of his powerful and bewitching *sociologie sacrée*.

Sacred sociology may be considered as the study not only of religious institutions but of the totality of the communal movement of society.¹⁵⁶

As detailed in the previous section, Bataille distinguished two chief macro-forces of collective (social) behavior animating the world today: heterogeneity and homogeneity. The former is the power of the inner experience and of communion with “evil,” whereas the latter is the dour sphere of rational production and prohibition. A tug-of-war ensues between the two. “The heterogeneous thing,” Bataille warned, is “charged with a force unknown and dangerous.”¹⁵⁷ Imagine then heterogeneity as a warm undercurrent, which, circulating through a system of metal pipes, periodically builds up enough pressure to jet out of the joints by rupturing them. The image further suggests that this soupy, heterogeneous current might have a subversive goal. That, indeed, of corroding the pipes so thoroughly that, by gushing out with violence, the sacred fluid might end up flooding the entire system.

The unleashing of the passions is the only good. [. . .] From the moment that reason is no longer divine, from the moment that there is no god, [there] is no longer anything in us that deserves to be called good, if not the unleashing of the passions.¹⁵⁸

The undercurrent is “the unleashing of the passions” under the sacred suggestion of the archons; to Bataille, *they* are the only gods left, and it is our duty to clear them through the rusted walkways of our oppressive, middle-class maze.

How is one to corrode the pipes, break the homogeneous laws and unleash the sacred rage?

By means of the “project,” the words, and laughter.

The whole of existence, as far as men are concerned, is in particular tied to language. [. . .] Being in its [private existence] can be mediated only by words, which can yield it as “autonomous being” only arbitrarily, but profoundly as “being in relation with.”¹⁵⁹

For Bataille, no one speaks for himself; humans are wounded valves, scarred release points through which flows the sacred energy of violence. The words, however, may be ordered to form a language, which can become a common idiom for all. And speaking this peculiar idiom, the individual would realize that he is but a “particle inserted within sets, unstable and tangled.”¹⁶⁰ To know oneself, according to Bataille, is to lose oneself into the knowledge of others: one precipitates into a “labyrinth formed by a multitude of knowledges (*connaissances*) with which expressions of life and phrases may be exchanged.” In the labyrinth man is a “satellite,” a “peripheral element gravitating round a *core* where Being hardens.”¹⁶¹ Concrete instances of the peculiar vernacular that is spoken in the “labyrinth” may be gleaned from Bataille’s poetic output, in all those bits of delirious prose where boundaries are erased and deliquescent imagery is indulged, and in the Sadean exercises of articulating turpitude. It seems that Bataille was inviting the reader to try his hand at embracing the horror by jotting it down, speaking it, much as one learns a new foreign language. Foucault would achieve superlative fluency in this field. It is also an invitation to share among peers similar experiences in which all sense of self has disappeared into something alien: into that very world of black sacred that Bataille himself has attempted to fathom in his entire production.

I write to erase my name.¹⁶²

Of fundamental importance is the mention of the “core” (*le noyau*). The “core,” or “social core,” is “a set of objects, places, creeds, persons and practices having a sacred character,” which belongs to a peculiar group of individuals and no other. “The social core is, in effect, taboo: untouchable and unnamable; it partakes from the outset in the nature of cadavers, of menstrual blood or of the pariahs.”¹⁶³ So Bataille suggested that there exist *primordial* creeds—he said so explicitly in connection with heterogeneity—of an infernal (degenerate) nature, cults of death that are animated by a core: it is the correct chanting of these particular prayers and mantras by particular people in particular places that set in motion these great waves of collective participation. They issue from this kernel. The latter projects bizarre geometrical nests, such as this “labyrinth of ‘knowledges’” within which the believers gather, losing themselves and sharing, as a result, one common lore that mediates by means of words the variety of inner experiences contributed by the participants. Bataille took the core as a given: it is there always; from the

moment that two beings enter into its “terrifying” orbit, their mutual relationship will find itself greatly altered, and perennially filtered by the energy emanating from the core.¹⁶⁴ The core exerts a double movement of attraction and repulsion, “which maintains [the] unanimous adhesion [of the believers] at a respectful distance.” Communion is achieved through the spiraling motion of a “peripheral laughter, excited by the continual emissions of specific energy, of sacred forces, which are issued from [this] central core.”¹⁶⁵ The phenomenon described by Bataille is not unknown to modern individuals; they frequently experience a faint echo of these powers of sacred radiation, as when, finding themselves exposed to strong, “graphic” images (be it pornography, slasher movies, or death on the screen), they often react by *laughing*—they laugh to deflect, at first, the gripping yet vertiginous pull that those images exert upon them.

This, in embryo, is a theoretical account of the liturgy necessarily active behind all “tragic” rituals and ceremonies consummated in honor of deities that demand bloodshed in the form of a taboo-breaking crime.¹⁶⁶ “Blood,” said Jünger, “has its own laws. It is untamable as the sea.”¹⁶⁷ Ancient sovereign empires might have disappeared but Bataille still believed that for man nothing was more important than “to recognize himself tied to what horrifies him the most”¹⁶⁸—one way or another these heterogeneous prayers had to be re-evoked. As he journeyed through the past to survey the evolution of this “core,” Bataille considered that if “an agglomeration is characterized by centrality, as in the primitive and feudal societies, it still features a movement towards concentration of power, [which is itself] tied to the movement that revolves round sacred things. [. . .] It is power that creates the force of the police and not the police that creates power.”¹⁶⁹ Bataille was conceivably much attracted to warrior societies; not just the Aztecs or the cannibals of Melanesia but also, and especially, the fastuous cavaliers of the Christian middle ages. Medieval Europe, with its separate agglomerations of sacred and military power, and its devotion to the sword, shone like the fieriest of rubies in the great book of sovereign history. But it was already a decadent phase of that history; the sun was setting over Gilles de Rais. In these societies “the core” may be observed in its integrity: it is solidly, roundly held in the hands of a caste of priests-warriors. Military might and religious might are united to create a stable configuration of *power*: power coalesces when religious and military authority coincide in the body of a single leader, who wields them, in sovereign fashion, over, if not against, the heads of the people.¹⁷⁰

Then, something of extraordinary momentum came to pass: “To this hard core of power was added a formation, which derives from it, but which remains exterior to it.” This alien “formation” has been capable of siphoning off the core all the energy it needs to engage in its operations *outside* the sphere of the core. This usurpation, “this fatal alteration of the collective movement” as Bataille characterized it, has given power its new, and nowadays preeminent, form. Between “the creative agitation of the sacred forms” and this new protagonist, there suddenly arose a confrontation: the sacred felt “a profound aversion” for everything that this novel political reality was absorbing within itself “for the

sake of *conservation*.¹⁷¹ In other terms, there came a point in history when the old sovereign empires came to suffer the birth and encroachment of the modern States. The modern State came to rule through laws that were not those of erotic splendor, but of thrift and capitalistic accumulation. The bourgeois ethos, unlike the sovereign one, sought to *conserve* rather than dilapidate.

This was, in brief, Bataille's prologue to a general theory of the rise of modernity. He eventually came to define "power" what Weber, for instance, identified as the "spirit of capitalism" or "bureaucratic, instrumental rationality,"¹⁷² Veblen as the "the machine process,"¹⁷³ Steiner as the "Ahrimanic spirit,"¹⁷⁴ Marx as "Capital," Polanyi as "the great transformation," Sombart as "the bourgeois spirit,"¹⁷⁵ Jünger and Heidegger as "nihilism" (see chapter 8), and Guénon (whose account is curiously closest to that of Bataille) as "temporal power"¹⁷⁶ or "the reign of quantity."¹⁷⁷

The rise of "the Mechanical Age" is the great divide in the collective memory of the Western culture. In the last one hundred and fifty years the West has indeed been subjected to a wholesale mechanization, not just of its economic metabolism, but of its collective mind as well—all is number, rules, discipline, steel and glass, cost and benefit, routine and schedule. The lifeblood of humans has been trapped in a grid. For Bataille, "power," was thus this "fatal alteration of the collective movement," which had crowded the warrior-kings out of the core with an administrative machine.

Likely, power is the institutional union of the sacred force and of military might (*puissance*) in a single person, who wields them to his personal advantage and thereby to the exclusive advantage of the institution.¹⁷⁸

Power, in other words, is the institutional (and historical) outcome of a process of appropriation: the sovereign temples of the Elders were ransacked, and the sacred force, which they guarded, was first encroached upon by the kings of the medieval era, before finding itself entrapped and hardened into the steel apparatus of the modern-day bureaucracy. In the Middle Ages, this duality found expression in the terms of "*spiritual power*" and "*secular power*." According to Bataille, the disquietude engendered by this separation gave way to an obsessive representation of the sacrifice of the king, which may be witnessed in the quasi-industrial production by Catholic workshops of crucifixes and portrayals of the anointed/king (the Christ) slain on the cross.¹⁷⁹ *Heterogeneity itself bifurcated into an ethos of the Master and an ethos of the Slave, and the two were irreconcilable.* Bataille speculated that if the condition of the slave conforms with the filth in which he is doomed to live, the master acts to repel the vermin from his sovereign domain. The act of exclusion—which Bataille named "political sovereignty"—"appears first of all as sadistic activity that is clearly differentiated." In other words, the prince may give vent to his instinctive revulsion for the scum through sadistic acts of cruelty, as in Gilles de Rais's "orgies of blood," or he may find sublimated egresses for it: this is how "in a great number of religious attitudes, sadism thus accedes to splendid purity (*pureté éclatante*)."¹⁸⁰ In general, and as time progressed, "the royal imperative form" chose to compromise by shunning

out unclean heterogeneity through homogeneous devices: re-education, lenient sentences, conservation of life in short.¹⁸⁰ And wars of foreign conquest came to be a favorite among all “sublimated egresses.”

It is thus that the destructive passion (sadism) of the imperative instance is, in principle, directed exclusively either against foreign societies, or against the wretched classes, against all the elements, internal and external, that are hostile to *homogeneity*.¹⁸¹

Bataille’s general theory of power may be likened to a social map covered by the complex interplay of three forces: the sovereignty of the pontiffs, the wrath of the rabble and the emerging, flattening power of homogeneous modernity. Such a model allows one to characterize the evolution of societies from their sacred beginnings to their late institutional arrangements. Arrangements such as those of, say, modern-day Britain, which exhibits vividly the signs of the fatal “alteration” in its passage from kingdom to a Liberal/industrial democracy crowned by the hollowed-out sovereignty of Buckingham Palace and bottomed by the scum of the hooligans. It is an important theoretical piece also because it affords fascinating connections to America’s present War on Terror (see chapters 8 and 9), and especially because this very glimpse of power’s evolution is the aperçu that Foucault would steal and pass off as his own.

What is “power” in a modern framework? It is an authoritarian nightmare, such as that dreamt by Dostoyevsky in the tale of the Grand Inquisitor. In life, said Bataille, it takes the shape of a regime that “attempts to paralyze [the Dionysian frenzy] by conjuring, when threatened by [sacred] crime, the counterthreat of the henchman’s ax: *power* is the only force that seeks blindly to eradicate crime from the earth when, in fact, all religious forms are impregnated with it.”¹⁸² By striving to wipe religious worship clean of all criminal activity, Bataille argued, power has gradually given way to “rationalism” and lost in the process the solidity of his erstwhile sacred and military authority. Thus, the warrior, sovereign empires of yore, have suffered an alteration, a corruption of their original energy, which has crystallized itself instead into a rigid, icy ministerial organ: *the State*. The “State” is the profane and “cowardly” tool of the middle-class philistines—the emerging and victorious class of the modern epoch. “Cowardly,” for it is “too interested,” too avaricious in conserving life to its advantage without having the courage to look crime, or death, in the eyes.¹⁸³ The modern *Liberal* regime has made punishment by death a sterilized feat, which it administers by casting crime and the criminals *out* of the system; likewise, the homogeneous society, as seen, repels from its sanitized apparatus all human excretions and the kindred swarms of trash and vermin. It is incapable of assimilating the heterogeneous, sacred material of the primordial core: “mobs, warrior castes, aristocrats and wretches, the violent ones—madmen, fuglemen, poets, etc.”¹⁸⁴ This tumultuous shuffle of religious sentiment, political shifts, and spiritual dissension ended up yielding three main human types: it inspired Bataille to paint a triptych featuring: (1) the armed thug (*butor*); (2) the tragic man; and (3) the man of law and discourse.

The “butor” is the modern day tyrant: a ribald that solves with violence everything that agitates him by diverting it to the “*outside*”; death for him is a form of exterior enjoyment, something reserved for the enemy. The butor is the swaggering *condottiere*: from Gilles de Rais to Mussolini. One could then say that Lyndon Johnson or Bush II, on the other hand, are but televised simulacra of such archetypes.

The tragic man is the one, instead, who has reconciled himself with the violence of life; who does not eschew the stench of its decay and the juice of its rottenness. He is the sovereign individual. It is Bataille himself, and Foucault’s role model.

Finally, the man of law and discourse is the middle-class employee of the great industrial complex (corporate or otherwise). The latter, said Bataille, can easily be hired by the butor, but in no manner can the man of tragedy be made subservient to the tyrant:¹⁸⁵ there thus appears to be a diehard rebel in the skin of every postmodern Bataillean.

We may take the liberty to doubt the truthfulness of this presumption. In reality, of all white-collar employees, the man of tragedy seems to be no less pliable to the thug’s wishes than the man of discourse. We shall explain why shortly.

This tripartition is not surprising, or original: Bataille had reiterated a truism. As mentioned earlier, all societies, in every epoch and everywhere, consist of but three constituent parts: the State, that is the sphere of rights; the economy; and the spiritual sector, namely, the arts and sciences (i.e., the spiritual sector). Bataille’s thug represents the governmental sphere; the man of law and discourse is a creature straddling the bureaucratic and economic domains; and the man of tragedy is Bataille’s token representative of the spiritual sphere; he is the contemporary coryphaeus of the ancient chthonic cults. Again, Bataille purposely erased the Apollinian tradition, and thanks to his special treatment of the “fatal alteration” of power, he subsumed *all non-Dionysian traditions* into the rationalistic degeneration of the machine era. Clever. He made a slip, though.

In the late thirties, at the time he was elaborating his sacred sociology, he leaned on his work to sing the praise of fascism.

The Fascist, *heterogeneous*, action belongs to the realm of the superior forms. It appeals to those sentiments traditionally defined as *lofty* and *noble*, and tends to constitute authority as an unconditional principle, situated above all utilitarian judgment.¹⁸⁶

In the latter he saw a pure expression of heterogeneity. Here was a militarized party, commanded by a sovereign chief (Mussolini the Duce), which, allegedly, had succeeded in rallying the wretched masses—*les classes miserables*¹⁸⁷ and the patrons of the economy (the “homogeneous” element) to a supreme principle of unquestioned authority—the authority that enabled the ruler(s) “to dominate over if not oppress one’s fellow-creatures, by reason of their age, of their physical weakness, etc.” Wasn’t this a genuine embodiment of the “royal” prerogative, “in which are manifest, to the highest degree, the cruel tendencies and the need to

idealize order?"¹⁸⁸ These, for Bataille, were all sovereign, positive traits. To Nazism he took no liking whatever, though not on account of its martial truculence; that was a trait he approved. It was rather Nazism's racialism that annoyed Bataille, for he found it devoid of any scientific basis. Moreover, he resented the disparaging remarks about the cult of the Great Mother that Hitler's chief ideologue of the race, Alfred Rosenberg, made in his *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*.¹⁸⁹ Bataille understood that Rosenberg, despite his high public rank, was indeed peripheral to the sacred custody of the Nazi lore, though at the time he obviously failed to notice that this very Nazi lore, in its highest esoteric elaboration, was not at all hostile to the Great Mother and Lucifer the Sun god; if anything, the very opposite was true.¹⁹⁰

Bataille should have exercised more caution. As we shall have occasion to recount the episode in chapter 8, when Bataille wrote an enthusiastic commentary to Ernst Jünger's apocalyptic, yet lewdly enthralled, depiction of the carnage of the Great War, he came, in fact, to endorse an author that would find himself involved in the obnubilation of Nazism. Yet this fact should astound no one: if one espouses the cult of blood too strongly and for too long, one will soon reconnect oneself with the lore of all holocaust-practicing regimes, including Nazism. It is inevitable. To back out of this position, which is today unbearably "incorrect," Foucault himself would later have to offer a contorted apology (see following chapter). One way or another, this tryst with fascism is a piece of Bataille that his devoted critics systematically try to ignore, and when they cannot, they gloss over it as swiftly and briefly as they can.

Bataille saw in the progressive mechanization of the modern regimes a complete surrender and disintegration of "the core." Modern States did usurp the sacred energy of the ancient heterogeneous agglomerations, but managed for some time to keep a semblance of the old sacred order by investing, say, the "love for one's country" (*la patrie*) with the solemnity that is typical of ancient sacred power.¹⁹¹ As the technicized bureaucracy rendered progressively all such sentiments obsolete and ultimately incomprehensible, the core became then "*mobile and diffuse, and it is impossible to speak of anything other than a set of places, objects and persons . . . The diffuse character alters but little in the rhythm of the movement.*"¹⁹² So we return to our metaphor of the viscous undercurrent pressuring to break free from the stricture of the iron maze.

In sum, what is the final engagement in our world? "In the last analysis," Bataille prophesied, "the *empire* will belong to those whose life will be bursting to a degree such that they will love death."¹⁹³ These lovers of death, bearers of the chthonic tradition, *are* the diffuse core; they animate its rhythm and form a broth of "knowledges" that circulate in the underground, and whose vitality the "regime of power" vampirizes to survive. The project is to allow the unrestricted circulation of the energy of the core, and see to it that it corrodes the pipes of the disciplinarian grid. One will have to convert, convince those on the outside that they themselves are but the mouthpieces of forces greater than they—convert them to the cult of death, or at the very least to the disbelief in compassion. There is no place on this earth for *sensiblerie* (sentimentalism); man should stand his

sovereign ground like an animal.¹⁹⁴ Whether many or few are gained to the cause, Bataille was assured by the sheer growth of resources produced in an industrial setting, that in one form or another this immense throughput would by itself entice the accursed explosion of protracted and unlimited hecatombs. By slaughter, and through slaughter, the project could not but be enormously facilitated.

Bataille would have clearly accepted the expostulations of SS Major-General Otto Ohlendorf, the scholarly commander of *Einsatzgruppe D*, who was responsible for the death of 90,000 Jews on the Eastern front. Ohlendorf insisted at his trial that “posterity would be unable to perceive the difference between his mass executions on the Russian Front and the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.”¹⁹⁵ From a bird’s eye view, holocaust the one, holocaust the other—it’s all the same to Bataille, and, in principle, he wasn’t wrong.

If the disasters of Hiroshima are freely envisioned from the standpoint of a sensitivity that may not be duped, they cannot be isolated from the others. The tens of thousands of victims of the atom bomb are on the same plane as the tens of millions that annually Nature offers to Death. One may not deny the differences in age and suffering, but the origin and the condensation are of no consequence to the end-result: the horror is everywhere the same.¹⁹⁶

He concluded and prescribed:

The man of the sovereign sensitivity, staring affliction in the face, does not say rashly: “Let us suppress it, at all costs,” but rather, “Let us live it.” Let us elevate our daily life to a form attuned to the worst. [. . .] It is better to live up to the challenge of Hiroshima than it is to whine and to be unable to bear the thought of it.¹⁹⁷

Again, he refused to rebel and embraced the violence for ever. A conservative till the end.

All the elements conjured to organize the discussion of the Bataillean system may be grouped graphically in the following schema (see figure 5.2).

This is in essence a cycle of economic production, which begins, in abstract, with the surplus. From this point of origin resources transit into the realm of “Sacred Authority.” Divine worship may be divided (node A) either into Apollinian practice (that is, recognizing a transcendent principle of orderly and harmonic beauty, corroborated by a testimony of compassion and pacifity),¹⁹⁸ or chthonic practice, that is Dionysian-Aprodistic cults of violence and holocaust. The offerings to these different, opposed sets of principles are reciprocated in their characteristic forms (bountiful harvests, rain, and knowledge charged of different, opposite valence). This is the movement of dissipation: the offering devoted to the gods.

The requited gift flows back into the profane realm of the “Profane (or temporal) Power,” crossing over the barrier of the taboo (the interdiction), which delimits the two worlds. The profane realm is that of accumulation and

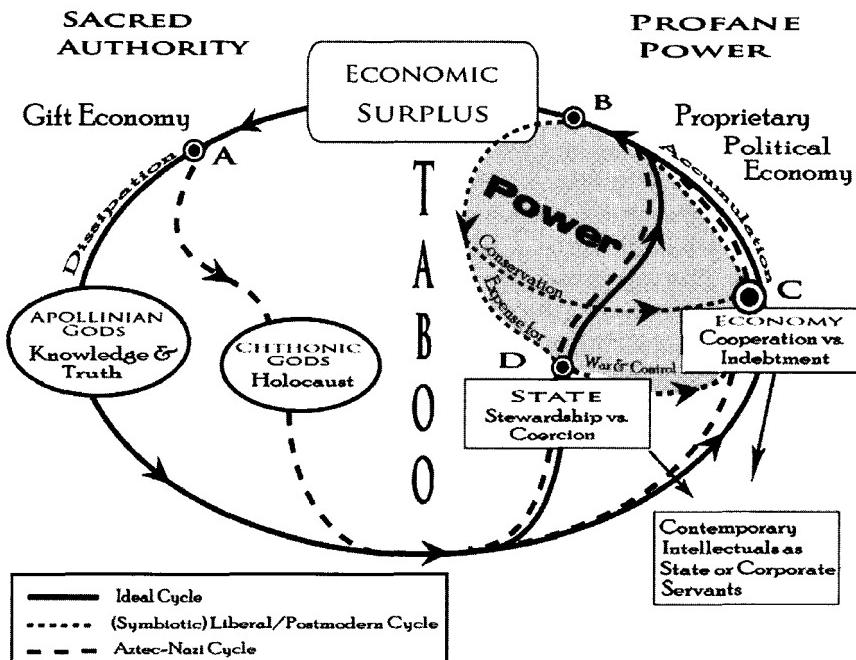


Figure 5.2 A scheme of Bataille's sacred sociology.

production. The gift expended for the gods finds its way back into the profane domain by feeding the other two spheres of social activity: the State and the economy. The administration (node D) receives its laws from the priesthood (which resides in the sacred), and the economy (node C) processes anew the bounties of nature and ingenuity, which also accrue as gifts from the sacred. Together, State and economy set into motion a new cycle of accumulation, which will expend itself in the way just described.

With the advent of modern times, a subloop (node B) manages to nest into the original system of accumulation by appropriating, or better, by diverting an ever greater share of the surplus and *conserving* it. This is the modern, proprietary system of absentee ownership, which despises "taxes." In this case, the gift is made to travel ever more infrequently in the sacred sphere, and is sequestered in a self-feeding cycle of: (1) swelling bureaucratic obtrusiveness and pervasive militarization ("Expenses for War and Control"); and (2) mere oligarchic perpetuation, effected through continuous banking and financial bleeding of the productive body. This subloop inscribes a subsystem (area in gray) within the main cycle, which is "power" in the Bataillean sense. In other words, "power" is the new physiognomy of our modern "Liberal democracies."

Under the aegis of power, the sacred role of the State degenerates from stewardship to coercion, and that of the economy from cooperation to indebtedness (of the weak to the oligarchs).

Bataille's ribald (*le butor*) becomes the leader of the coercive State, and the "man of law and discourse" becomes the corporate officer of the financial economy. The "man of tragedy" would be expected to be seen moving along the main cycle by way of the chthonic offramp, but our contention is that he is rather a "particle" fully immersed in the system of power, in whose productive capacity and military buildup he foresees ideal scenarios of chaos. So, in the last analysis, we have three streams: the ideal, Apollinian course, the chthonic course, and the proprietary/Liberal course.

The stream that is *institutionally* dead, contrary to what Bataille tendentiously argued, is the cycle of the holocaust. Which does not mean that holocausts no longer happen, or else Bataille would not be in business. But as a sacred cult, the core of the Aztecs and that of like heterogeneous civilizations is extinct.

The proprietary system of absentee ownership is clearly the most vivid reality of the modern world: the Liberal creed that fuels it is based on materialism, fierce competitiveness, an unlimited desire to exploit for the sake of remuneration, and the gradual abolition of gifting, cooperation, and mutual help. It is through and through an antitraditional, anticompassionate system of thought. Therefore, we realize that the "profound aversion," which, according to Bataille, Dionysians like himself should putatively conceive for the thrifty bourgeois can only be superficial, if not altogether illusory. They might not "like" one another, but both factions ultimately find themselves united against compassion and pacifism. And the object of such a joint adversity—the Apollinian cycle—though greatly weakened for internal and external reasons, is still institutionally alive: it lives in all compassionate traditions of the world, and in the hearts of all individuals. Therefore, this potential for positive change may also be realized by clearing one's mind of all those adversarial and noxious systems of thought, like Bataille's, that have been assembled, and unscrupulously diffused, to cloud our judgment.

In the graph, we have drawn the streams in such a way as to make the whole argument of Bataille appear as a construction of barriers erected to fend off the spirit of harmonious order: power, in fact, is represented as being moated by its self-serving cycle at one remove and by the chthonic stream at the next, as if to keep the Apollinian perennially "outside the city walls," as it were.

Finally, there remains to explain, what could have possibly been the desire to promote a view like that of Bataille, in light of the fact that a true revival of chthonic worship in a liberal system was, indeed, unachievable. Bataille did not gaze too far into the eventual intricacies of power networks in the modern era, and he certainly would have strongly rebuffed the accusation that he was pursuing, in collusion with Liberal intellectuals, a hostile maneuver aimed at compassion. Bataille's abhorrence for his epoch was genuine; but his plans were impracticable. From the fringes of the Parisian scene, he wrote demoniacal fancies and imaginative social science in the key of death. He acquired a modest notoriety toward the end of his life, but no stardom. In March 1961, one year before his death, Bataille was interviewed by a journalist of *L'Express*, Marguerite Chapsal, the self-same publicist who would be instrumental in launching Foucault's public career

five years later. In the interview, Bataille confided that the intellectual contribution of which he was proudest was to have associated the most turbulent, shocking, and scandalous form of speech with the religious spirit of the deepest sort.

It is very clear that one way or another, whatever type of society we may have, ultimately this rage is to be found everywhere, because I don't believe that we can reach a state of affairs such as will allow us to overcome this rage.¹⁹⁹

It seems that a mass audience today can hardly develop an immediate taste for Bataille's morose and deliquescent artistry. *But if the latter is somehow masked*, and artfully presented, it is undeniable that there exists in our time an active and coordinated effort to diffuse such a philosophy of despair among as many individuals as possible. So, to repeat the question: Why would certain Interests be keen to publish and push the works of Bataille among the public?

In itself, the production of Bataille makes certainly for an intriguing specimen of twentieth century literature; it is indeed a fascinating testimony. As science, most of it is irrelevant, except for his "notion of expenditure" and the excerpts from the "sacred sociology." So, it is in its *propagandistic form* that the opus of Bataille is here ultimately evaluated. As the inspiring source of one of America's late intellectual patron saints (Foucault), the only reason that would justify the promotion and diffusion of his works—whether directly or indirectly, that is, via Foucault—is their peculiar iconoclasm. This iconoclasm is an odd brew of violence and *particularism*, as well as an irresponsible invitation to transgress, all of which stimuli have altogether no other effect, if touted deeply and long enough, than to numb the reader and to insinuate doubts as to the sensibility of protecting and conserving life at any cost.

The situation of the human being—the condition of his existence—is such as to belie his desire to identify himself with this universe, of which he is apparently but an accident: the perpetual dissension, the opposition pitting one tribe against another, a nation against another, a group against another, render man's pretension to universality derisory. [Such a dissension] has compromised the minds of men in a continual lie. Finally, is there anything more pathetic, from the standpoint of universality than to connect the latter to [...] the "ideas" and "types of existence" that only a certain number of men possess in common? Each world view, each belief and each heresy represented so many attempts to reduce [this yearning for universality] to something narrow, self-contained, particular.²⁰⁰

Of course, there is no wish here to suggest that all decent, even-tempered individuals might, upon reading Bataille, convert instantly to the ways of sovereign dilapidation and violent eroticism, yet it is never imprudent to assess unambiguously, beyond the sexy language and the suggestive metaphors, what the authors we read truly stand for. And, the passage above, which could have been most easily penned today either by a Foucauldian or a Neoconservative hawk, confirms yet again that there undoubtedly exists the will, by publishing and publicizing authors such as Bataille, to deride insistently our desire to know, to

mock our yearning for communion across divides, and to suggest unrelentingly that separation and war are the ways of the world.

But shouldn't we all be free to pursue these yearnings for peace and knowledge, and categorically refuse the ways of war no matter how innate these might be in us? Apparently not. And so, precisely because Bataille's wish to reenact Dionysism was doomed from the start, as he well knew, it logically follows by a process of exclusion that the true *target of his postmodern attack, often echoed by the Liberals themselves, is not the Liberal State, but the streak of compassion that survives in it. No other viable policy, or clear design, emerges from his sociological sketches.* One has but to look at the rapidity and depth with which this type of Bataillean ideology has spread by way of Foucault within the highest circles of academe and even political power in the United States—all of which regularly profess undying belief in the “highest human values”—to realize that something far more ominous is afoot than a mere, aesthetic call to orgiastic frenzy and delirious poetry for the weekend.

The plague has spread, but it has not taken over just yet. This is due on the one hand to the inherent strength of the compassionate tradition, and on the other hand to the state of mental disorientation prevailing among postmodernism's recent recruits. Many of such “high-minded democrats,” as pointed out in the introduction, have still not resolved these issues in their hearts, and their hesitation has made accordingly the subterranean Bataillean militancy weaker. But such indecision, even though it may act as a brake, clearly does not bode well for the future of American schools and society and the realm of dissent broadly defined.

In synthesis, the story of Bataille is that of a French seminarian that in a night of delirium, holding an open umbrella under a sky without rain, had a vision, an inner experience. He experienced a reconciliation with a lost worship, which invited men to agree to the shedding of blood for the sake of religious communion. Not only did he begin thereafter to fathom the mystery of sacrificial surrender, but he also found himself able to reconnect and trace a multitude of otherwise inexplicable manifestations of bizarre or repulsive human conduct back to this creed of the Elders. Within the principles of this rediscovered inferno, all these clues reacquired meaning and a proper location. He became so entranced with the prospect of divulging the experience to his peers that he reinvented a series of rites, a society and, far more important, a brand-new “sociology of the holy” to serve as the book for his improvised cult. Understanding that this ancient religion might never relive in its original form, he devised means to graft its spiritual suggestion upon the conventional mindset. The method he followed to effect this transfer was to attack one by one all the taboos that tradition's erected: promiscuousness, sodomy, murder, excretions, prepotence, the holocaust, and intoxication. And he attempted to rehabilitate each in succession, by consummating them, inviting others to follow his example, and legitimizing through discourse all such acts of transgression as the orderly commandments of some monstrous angels. Archons that are but the complement of a world of light and creation, the two being manifestations of the aboriginal seed, symbolized by

a muscular ghost without head wielding a glaive. As he called the world to commune, he also contrived a theory of power, which emanated from a pulsating core. The core was the spark of the ancestral confession, which inspired men with sovereign behavior. In warrior-societies this kernel of sacred authority was in the custody of a militant priesthood, but in time modern State bureaucracy depleted the core to such a degree that it lost its solidity and slowly disintegrated. The fragmentation did not reduce its potential, but decentered its source of diffusion. Today the core is everywhere, waiting to speak through the actions of each one of us. Man is but a particle of this whirl of aboriginal knowledge, and he must use language to dissolve the consciousness of being who he is, and recognize at all time that he is but channeling the power of this fragmented core, which bespeaks the lore of those monstrous gods, with whom we must now make our long-lasting peace.

If this were a hoax, what a hoax that would be.

But, alas, it isn't. Many have taken this seriously.

"To dare to read Bataille," recites an epitaph by one of his many contemporary academic devotees, "is to *dare to live ethically and face death in a sovereign way*."²⁰¹ Bataille must be laughing in his grave, thrusting "into the void of life a gaze loaded with the mortal violence of being."²⁰²

Another exalted fan of Bataille worriedly posed the anguishing question:

How [in the contemporary world] can the possibilities of heterogeneous society be re-opened? Would not any potential social myth run up against the brick wall of individualism? [. . .] If social solidarity was once founded in a sense of collective guilt in the primal crime that separated us from our roots in nature, can a joyful embrace of guilt—such as Bataille experienced through his inner experience—provide the possibility for a re-invigoration of society? How can individualism be transformed back into social belonging? These are issues that Bataille tried to tackle *in such a moving way*. To say that he was unable to answer them is hardly to diminish his work, but in the contrary reveals how important it was.²⁰³

"Social belonging" was never the issue: Bataille spoke occasionally of "community" but obviously had not the faintest interest in it; he would have lived in one, in silence, had he so desired. His objective, as he himself avowed, was to "overturn everything by all means." Admittedly, he did not quite find the proper means to bring this about during his lifetime. But he had shown the way. The theory was ready, now it was a matter of practice, experiment. That is when Foucault came in.

CHAPTER 6

Foucault and the Social Science-Fiction of Neo-Gnosticism

I have been considered by liberals a technocrat, an agent of the Gaullist government; I have been considered by people on the right, Gaullist or otherwise, as a dangerous left-wing anarchist; there was an American professor who asked why a crypto-Marxist like me, manifestly a KGB agent, was invited to America, and so on.

Michel Foucault¹

Michel Foucault was not a mere imitator; he clearly developed the Bataillean project—which is fundamentally a discursive blueprint for chthonic religious awakening—in a practical, applied direction. So practical that his re-elaboration of these infernal themes came in the late sixties to be co-opted into the official rhetoric of France’s Liberal regime. After a decade of finessing, his brand of thinking, like a certified strain of red wine from the sunny Midi, was “turned into a major export industry”² and was thenceforth to be found in all aisles of all academic supermarkets in the United States—always a top-seller. Today, “many if not most of the studies of Foucault to be found in Parisian book shops are translations from the English.”³

A remarkable achievement.

The “experts” list Bataille as *one* of Foucault’s inspirations, though the acephalic guru is by no means given preeminence in the intellectual pedigree of the “great Foucault.” Bataille figures are little more than an eccentric literatus whose nocturnal insights were tastefully blended by Foucault into the rich texture of his philosophical construction. Foucault himself was naturally responsible for misleading the historians on this count: he appealed with emphasis rather to the intellectual debt he owed, say, to Heidegger or, of course and above all, to Nietzsche. In this connection, Bataille himself was often labeled in reference sources as a Nietzschean. If one adds the visible structure of Hegelian influence both on Foucault and Bataille, which is undeniable, then the mix becomes thick and the door is open to say whatever one pleases on the subject. But that would be unwarranted.

Leaving the German idealist veneer aside,⁴ which serves often as a teleological implement to fabulize about whatever one wishes, and leaving for once Nietzsche in peace—he will not be needed here any more than in a million of other venues where his thoughts have been distorted *ad libitum* for a variety of ends⁵—we will argue that Foucault took up where Bataille left off. The line of continuity uniting the two is the crucial link, the original tale that has made the Foucauldian model the philosophical export of the last century. If it is a fact that in America this model has been committed to memory as “Power/Knowledge,” then we need to look no further than to Bataille’s legacy to identify the seed, indeed, the core, of such a seductive approach. This chapter, therefore, is not devoted to exploring Foucault’s production as a whole—there is a vast literature in English on the subject that will satisfy that desire—but only the nature and originality of the “greatest hits” that made him top the U.S. charts since the late Seventies. Among Europeans, today, Foucault has been virtually forgotten; Power/Knowledge survives only in the United States.

When Gallimard, the prestigious Parisian press, released in 1970 Bataille’s complete works in twelve volumes, it was not by chance that Foucault, by then one of France’s most conspicuous academics, was selected to introduce the collection.

“Today we know it,” Foucault wrote in the presentation of the first tome, “Bataille is one the most important writers of his century. *The Story of the Eye*, *Madame Edwarda*, have broken the thread of narration to recount what had never been told before. What is tied to profound sexuality, for example, blood, smothering, sudden terror, crime, everything that destroys indefinitely human beatitude and honesty.”⁶ So Foucault told the reader that he was an admirer of Bataille’s, as he paid a tribute to “one of” the greatest. That is revealing enough. Yet the association goes much further than what this deferential, though by no means emphatic, encomium would lead one to assume.

Despite his obvious interest in Bataille, Foucault had never made any attempt to meet him.⁷

“Unlike Bataille, who was by profession a librarian and not a university teacher [. . .], Foucault was in many ways a product of the system.”⁸ The shift in style between the two was, in fact, dramatic. In the fifties, Foucault had undergone the excruciating discipline of France’s most elitist school, the *École normale supérieure*. Groomed and drilled at the highest level in the jargon of academia, his writing bears little semblance to the prose of Bataille. But it was the special digestion of Bataille’s sacred sociology into conventional academic meter that was going to buy him fame. In the early sixties, starting with his first major opus, *Madness and Civilization* (*Folie et déraison*, 1961), Foucault began to articulate his synthesis of the Bataillean “experience.” On the basis of extensive archival research and internships in the medical environment, he developed, as a doctoral student at France’s premiere academe, the thesis that madness is, in fact, a construction, an invention. It the clinical categorization of a triumphant bureaucracy

that, because it possesses no notion of vitality's sacred fire, has classed, punished, tamed, and relegated all forms alien to it into this prefabricated box of so-defined abnormalities. His first chapter opened with a vista on the wasteland left behind by the great plagues and the leprosy that had raged in the premodern era.

Leprosy withdraws, leaving without employ [the leprosariums and its rites], which were not destined to suppress it, but to project it onto a sacred distance, to fix it onto an inverse exaltation.⁹

The tenor was unmistakably Bataillean: this was a foreplay on the wrestling match between homogeneity (the leprosarium) and the heterogeneity (the disfiguring plague). From the corrosion of the pest, Foucault transported his narrative image aboard the literary trope of the *Narrenschiff*—the historically unfounded, but evocative ship of fools (*la nef des fous*) carrying lunatics and rejects along the banks of hostile boroughs. Thereby he sought to inject new vigor into the fighting cause of “madness” by adding tacitly a new chapter to Bataille’s “heterogeneity of the slave.”

This navigation of the madman ends up tracing, along the contours of a geography that is half-real, half-imaginary, the *liminal* situation of the madman. [. . .] The insane can only find his truth and homeland in this barren expanse between two realms that could not belong to him. [. . .] Water and madness have long been connected in the dream of the European man.¹⁰

Insanity is “liminal,” it breeds “at the margins,” and its rebellious drift is that of liquidity, moistness. Adopting Gnostic imagery, Foucault assimilated the vital purity of madness to *water*: “Madness is the liquid and streaming exterior of rocky reason. [. . .] Water [is] an infinite, uncertain space, dark disorder, moving chaos.”¹¹ Reason equals discourse, which dams the energy of chaos.

Bataille had written that “there is horror in Being”; this horror is that of “repugnant animality.”¹² As he proceeded to delineate the physiognomy of the insane as “sinner,” Foucault borrowed the selfsame images of the master (and his style as well):

When, at the final hour, the man of sin appears in his hideous nudity, one notices that he possesses the monstrous figure of a delirious animal. [. . .] The animal that haunts [the] nightmares of man [. . .] is his own nature, that which will bare the merciless truth of hell. [. . .] Already in this disorder, in this universe of madness, one may discern the outline of what shall be the final cruelty.¹³

Next came the challenge of knowledge, or rather, of Bataillean *non-savoir* (nonknowledge), along with a paean to Bataille’s apocalyptic cult of Satan the acephalic *Dioynusus redivivus*. Witness:

Madness fascinates because it is knowledge. It is knowledge first of all because all [its] absurd [manifestations] are in truth the elements of a difficult, esoteric, closed

knowledge. [. . .] What does it announce, this knowledge of madmen? Doubtless, because it is forbidden knowledge, it anticipates at the same time: the reign of Satan, and the end of the world; the final bliss and the ultimate punishment; the almighty power on earth and the infernal downfall. [. . .] The earth catches fire. [. . .] The world sinks into universal furor. Victory belongs neither to God nor the Devil; it belongs to madness.¹⁴

Foucault bestowed upon madness divine, evenhanded qualities; those, indeed, of the White Goddess—dispenser of birth and creation (including intellectual genius), and vengeful dispenser of death, misery, and destruction.

Absolute privilege of madness: she reigns over all that is bad in man. But does she not reign indirectly over all the good that he may achieve: over the ambition that foster political wisemen, over the greed that make riches grow, over the indiscreet curiosity that animates philosophers and savants?¹⁵

Ambition and greed? But aren't these the "virtues" routinely extolled by the Liberal-conservative worshippers of the free market? Since when have these traits become the object of a radical's affection?

Foucault contended that madness as a positive discipline was born out of conflict—a conflict between the *critical conscience* and the *tragic experience*: here, again, we find Bataille's Gnostic tension between discourse and experience. Folly, Foucault continued, could only be grasped "with reference to" the antagonistic realm of *reason*. "Madness has a twofold way of being *before* reason: it is at the same time on the *other side* of it and *under its gaze*. Madness is then caught in the *structures of the rational*."¹⁶ As Bataille had done for "evil," Foucault enjoined: "We must accept [folly], even embrace it."¹⁷ Finally, the leftist touch to complete the picture could not be forgone: "The madman," he added, "partakes of the obscure powers of *misery*."¹⁸ It is always good political form to root for the "poor." "The poor," Foucault declaimed, "form the bedrock and the glory of nations. And one must exalt and pay homage to their misery, which is insuppressible. [. . .] The poor: eternal face of need, symbolic passage of God made man."¹⁹ So Foucault had chosen his faction: the heterogeneity of the Slave. But notice first of all the homiletical tenor of the above quote: hardly the language of a self-professed religion-hater; and notice also how conservative this stance truly is: Foucault apprehended the poor as an irremovable fixture of the world. He hypostatized them and hoisted the poor's rag-flag from the plush comfort of his upper-class lodgings. And good Gnostic that he was, he couldn't even renounce the myth of Christ. In fact, he appropriated it by playing the very Bataillean trump of Christ's espousal of the "sacred impure." "One must not forget," he admonished, "that, in a way, Christ honored madness over the entire course of his human life; he has sanctified it just as he has sanctified the healed infirmity, the forgiven sin, poverty destined to eternal riches."²⁰

Foucault's examiners found the project intriguing, though they reckoned, disapprovingly, that the candidate thought "in allegories,"²¹ and that, in the last analysis, the work was not about madness at all, but about the cerebral style of classifying mental pathology.

Foucault, as he said, was carrying out the “archeology of an alienation.” He was fathoming how modern man had cast upon the madman “his own alienated truth.”²² Yet the stress of his thesis was laid not on the violent punishment that the inmates might suffer, as a compassionate stance would have led one to do with a view to denouncing the practice, but on the *conditioning* of that patient’s soul. The implicit denunciation was against the doctor’s desire to “organize the guilt” of the madmen, not of the bodily castigation of the insane.²³ “Venereal patients, homosexuals, blasphemers, [and] libertine alchemists” became the tenants of the madhouse, and it was their sins of “unreason” (*déraison*) that had brought them there. Hiding behind “their *crimes* and neuroses, lay a sort of common experience of *anguish*.” Trapped in the asylum, these *others* spontaneously wove “an underground network.” The Marquis de Sade, himself a famous victim of confinement for most of his life, became their bard, and he was the one that for the first time in history formulated a theory of “these lives of unreason.” For Foucault, it was in such chronicles of madness and exclusion that resided true knowledge, the “great collective memory of the peoples.”²⁴ His commentary on the Sadean episode is identical to Bataille’s. “The advent of sadism,” Foucault wrote, “occurs at a time when unreason, locked up for over a century and silenced, reappears, no longer as a mundane character, no longer as an image, but as *discourse* and desire. And it is no accident if sadism, as an individual phenomenon bearing the name of a man, is born of internment. . . .”²⁵

The true “sin” for Foucault was modernity’s attempt to *neutralize* the “dark rage, the sterile madness that lie in men’s hearts.”²⁶ The real folly was to have made madness a “calm object” of clinical observation.²⁷ Foucault did not resent the ancient, sovereign conception of madness as a malady, an affliction or a curse that God would cast upon men to punish them. What he found unbearable, and a sacrilege in his conception of existence, was that the modern God had now taken the guise of an accountant that “organized the forms” of madness, and enumerated its “varieties.”²⁸ This indictment is, we recognize, but a variation on the theme of Bataille’s modern, “altered power” intruding into the primordial vitality of the core. In Foucault’s variation, the energy of the core took the form *madness*, and the “community” became the great family of the insane, whose Gnostic praise Bataille had sung all his life. “The madman,” Foucault lamented, “found himself purified of his animality, or at least that part of his animality that was violence, predation, rage, savagery.” What he was left with was only a “docile animality.”²⁹ All of which brutish traits, as his present-day academic and middle-class audience misunderstands, or pretends not to understand, Foucault found tempting, alluring, positive in their genuineness—as genuine attributes “of the core.” He further justified his position, suggesting allusively that his book “is not a history of knowledge, but rather a history of the rudimentary movements of an *experience*.”³⁰ Of which “experience” he spoke is, again, no mystery: it is Bataille’s. If a text, as Foucault pointed out, becomes a labyrinth, at the center of this labyrinth there lurks a minotaur.³¹ Bataille is the minotaur in the Foucauldian maze.

As was to be expected, *Madness and Civilization* culminated in hagiographic pathos by paying homage to Nietzsche, who died “mad,” and the ferocious genius of the Marquis de Sade. These are Foucault’s early “tragic heroes,” all of them sons of Dionysus, “the old master of drunkenness, of anarchy, of death forever received,” whose power could be tapped “just outside ‘the gates of time’”³²—that is, where knowledge, as Bataille would say, becomes nonknowledge, and the monstrous archons have their abode. “Madness,” Foucault concluded, “conjures an inner world of foul instincts, of perversions, of suffering, and of violence, which had been theretofore relegated to the realm of sleep. [Madness] evokes a depth which gives meaning to the freedom of man; this depth exposed to daylight by madness is evil in its savage state. [. . .]. *The madness of desire, senseless murders, and the most unreasonable of passions are wisdom and reason for they are of the order of nature.* All that which morality and religion, all that which a badly built society have been able to smother in man, comes alive in the house of murders (*le château des meurtres*).”³³

Madness and Civilization garnered a few good reviews (including a positive note by the famous historian Fernand Braudel) and established Foucault’s academic reputation. He had wished for “great public recognition,” which wasn’t yet achieved, but it was a good start.³⁴

Thereafter Foucault began to experiment.

He set out to construe the Bataillean experience, and his intuitive contraposition of power and discourse as an abstract language-game, which would achieve a series of strategic and targeted ends. For one, the development of linguistic abstraction would sever the connection to all that “acephalic” imagery, which in an environment, such as that of Western academia in the postwar era, so profoundly and irremediably conquered by the most uncompromising form of cerebral speculation, could have never aspired to full citizenship. In other words, modern protocol required that the mystical and religious roots of the “experience” be expunged out of the context. God and Satan had been too long out of vogue. And, more important, Foucault thereby gave himself further leeway to perfect the articulation of this sentiment and love for chaos through language, which Bataille had failed to achieve. Foucault did so by mixing the discourse of the experience with a variety of other fashionable styles—nihilism, neo-Marxism, structuralism, and surrealistic literary criticism—so as to render the whole exercise, apparently, a (fresher) reformulation of the politics of dissent, which, seldom, if ever, programmatically tolerates overt religious yearning, even of the infernal sort. To make it palatable for the new Liberal readership, the Bataillean project would thus be recycled in the lingo of the Left with the superadded atheistic (and often purposely obscure) aestheticism of the French avant-garde circles. In the biennium immediately following the publication of his first book, Foucault purged of its mystical origins the treatment of the discourse speaking the tongue of evil, transforming it into this peculiar, abstract language-game:

The totality of language finds itself sterilized by the single and identical movement of two inseparable figures: the strict, inverted repetition of what has already been

said and the simple meaning of that which lies at the limit of what we can say. The precise object of ‘sadism’ is not the other, neither his body, nor his sovereignty: it is everything that might have been said. [. . .] It is the mute circle where the language deploys itself.³⁵

So now, there was no longer a mystical core, a symbol of an evil, a parallel reality, embodied by the base matter of the acephalic theology; all we had was “life” as a self-contained structure of language playing with itself, reflecting itself, duplicating itself ad infinitum without any possibility of exit, a space whose despairing closure and finiteness was echoed by the violent cry of the madmen (Sade, Nietzsche, et al.). In this sense, Dionysus’s drunkenness was no more the beckon to something “other,” but was rather the alien call that there existed nothing other than this world of discourse, which was without issue. In essence, the view remained that of Bataille, but in practice, through this play of words, the silence of violence was here used as a lantern to illuminate exclusively the limits of reality as we conceive it, through concepts and spoken reasoning. All else was mystique, which rationally speaking, meant nothing, and now all atheists and agnostics, not just the worshippers of excrement and “acephalic play,” could have joined the party. With the Gnostic teacher Basilides, we are back to the “God that is not” creating out of nothingness, though the experience was presently flattened by Foucault into a linguistic game. So “God” became a “simulacrum,” that is, “a vain image,” “a falsehood that causes one to take one thing for another,” “saying everything at the same time, and constantly simulating other than what it says.”³⁶ Glossing the literary work of his friend Pierre Klossowski, another member of this fraternity, as well as Bataille’s fellow goat-slayer of *L’Acéphale*,³⁷ Foucault buried the war of religions launched by Bataille into the folds of simulacra.

Klossowski’s experience is situated approximately there, in a world ruled by an evil genius who would not have found his god, or might also pose as God, or who might be God himself. [. . .] God himself put on the face of Satan in order to cloud the minds of those who do not believe in his solitary omnipotence. [. . .] In these twists and turns the perilous games of extreme similitude are multiplied: God who so closely resembles Satan who imitates God so well. [. . .] This world would not be Heaven, or Hell, or limbo, but quite simply our world. A world, finally, that would be the same as ours, except that, precisely, it is the same. [. . .] Neither God nor Satan ever appear in this space . . . [In this space] one crosses [. . .] a presence that is real only insofar as *God has absented himself* from the world, leaving behind only a trace and a void, so that the reality of the presence is the absence where it takes place.³⁸

No longer does God embody himself into a bug to find, in anguish, that he cannot exist. This time around, it is the *words* that are being played in a silly card game, which appears to have no purpose, not even a beginning or an end. The words “bug” and “God” become scribbles on chits that are shuffled and reshuffled in a deal that suggests its own senselessness. The names are simulacra—mere

tags—and the game itself renders the ideas, which these names represent, as unreal as the symbols themselves. We have entered the space of “hyper-reality” where the divide between truth and fiction blurs. Foucauldians such as Baudrillard would be offered by the foreign press wonderful opportunities to play this sort of hocus-pocus before large audiences, as when the time came “to comment on” the first Gulf War of 1991 (viz. chapter 9).

In this new, redesigned playground, Foucault could pay a lasting tribute to Bataille, indulging Gnostic similitudes in a space pruned of all “exterior” divinity and sporting all the confidence of a pupil that had surpassed the teacher. In *A Preface to Transgression*, a commemorative piece written in 1963, one year after the death of Bataille, Foucault thanked Bataille for murdering the transcendent God and thereby enabling everyone to share “an experience in which nothing may again announce the exteriority of Being, and consequently [. . .] an experience that is *interior* and *sovereign*.³⁹ But the antimonotheistic feeling that pervaded this ode to the dead master is inevitably soaked with that *devout* denial of God, which is the unmistakable mark of the grave-diggers of religion, religiously fanatic inquisitors in their own right. The battle of creeds was far from being over; if anything, it was now waged even more ferociously.

But what does it mean to kill God if he does not exist, to kill God *who has never existed*? Perhaps it means to kill God both because he does not exist and to guarantee that he will not exist. Certainly a cause for laughter to kill God to liberate life from the existence that limits it [. . .]—as a sacrifice. [. . .] To kill God in order to lose language in a deafening night and because this wound must make him bleed until there springs forth ‘an immense alleluia lost in the interminable silence’—and this is communication. The death of God restores us not to a limited and positivistic world but to a world exposed by the experience of its limits, made and unmade by that excess which transgresses it.⁴⁰

And so the Bataillean notion of “communication” might be wholly salvaged and recycled, or better, exploited through a use of language, which owes its “transgressive power to an inverse relation, that of impure speech to a pure silence.” “In Bataille,” said Foucault, “writing is an undone consecration—a transubstantiation ritualized in the opposite direction, where real presence again becomes a recumbent body and finds itself brought back to silence in a vomiting.”⁴¹ This was, once again, the “project,” whose realization, Foucault confidently forecast, “lies almost entirely in the future,” though “it is surely possible, he concluded, “to find in Bataille its calcinated roots, its promising ashes.”⁴²

We find anew in the above commentary Bataille’s image of all-encompassing Violence being intermittently pushed back by the “brief respite” of discourse. Likewise for Foucault, the infernal, alien nature of the “outside” is perennially hinted at, yet it is perennially repulsed by the impotence (indigence) of words by clearing a field for discourse, in a continuous play of reverberation with no possibility of solution.

As one can see, the Bataillean archons have vanished from the picture.

Foucault asked the question: Am I speaking when I say that I am speaking? That seemed “undeniably true,” Foucault admitted in the *Thought of the Outside*; “but,” he countered, “things may not be that simple.” “The subject that speaks is less the responsible agent of a discourse [. . .] than a nonexistence in whose emptiness the unending outpouring of language uninterruptedly continues.” He seemed to imply that we are but the orifices of this vomit from the outside, which we do not control. And so, returning once more to Sade, Foucault, in the spirit of Bataille, acknowledged the significance of the Marquis for the latter had “introduced into our thinking, for the coming century, but in the same way cryptically, the experience from the outside [. . .], by laying desire bare in the infinite murmur of discourse.”⁴³

In 1969, Foucault broached once more the theme of the subject in scientific discourse, and asked in *What is an Author?* the question: “Who is truly speaking?” And answered: “No one.” The author, according to Foucault, “is a functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes and chooses. [. . .] The author does not precede the works. [. . .] The author is the ideological figure by which we fear the proliferation of meaning. [. . .] What difference does it make who is speaking?”⁴⁴ Here the Bataillean identification of the subject with a point of “rebound,” as that caesura in the ensemble of the kernel (*noyau*), which marks a discontinuous break as he utters “the thought from the outside,” was recast by Foucault in a slightly varied fashion, but the idea was wholly unoriginal (hadn’t also Bataille said: “I write to erase my name”?).

This viewpoint would eventually lead to the extreme relativism of the Foucauldians, who would employ this sort of argument to discredit one form of theoretical understanding vis-à-vis another, and bend the sophistry to suit a variety of political arguments. They would in fact imply that as multitudinous points of rebound, all authors are mouthpieces of the “unknowable without,” and thus that all debate is bound to founder, and flounders in a Babel of equivalent nonsense. But one may notice how this argumentation did not issue from a mischievous desire to relativize everything *per se*, but rather from the intent to attack a very particular form of thinking, and that is the pursuit of truth for its own sake—what Bataille referred to as “absolute knowledge,” the antagonist of Dionysian chaos.

Already at this stage, many critics began, with some reason, to discard this sort of cartoonlike Foucauldian fantasia as a con-job: clearly, if all authors are mere punctuation marks in the overflow of discourse, what allows Foucault to situate himself above the common run of speech, and, from that vantage point, discern, or discriminate with respect to one speech or another? What makes one discourse different from another? How can a creation of discourse, such as Foucault’s own argument, speak of “discourse” in abstract? Why authors from the same cultural milieu can come to disagree violently about everything? And why do some men believe, say, in Allah and others don’t? And why does an individual go insane, and another one doesn’t? And who is to say who is mad and who is not, if we’re all scrawled commas in the senseless doodle of timeless existence? This is a

common and highly predictable objection, which is customarily leveled at all those who employ idealist systems of interpretation—systems that postulate some form of original, intangible principle (abstractly defined, be it earthly, material, or divine), of which individuals are said to be the tangible expression. If this principle is made all-encompassing, unstructured, and absolute, *as it is* in Foucault (though Bataille was more ambivalent on this score), then the objection holds.

But no matter, the ball was rolling, and there was no stopping the ascent of Foucault, who would never, neither he nor his followers, respond to this criticism. Besides, the match here was never one about logical consistency, but, as we have argued repeatedly so far, it was rather about religious supremacy. Logic or science have, by definition, little to do with such an issue.

In 1966, Foucault had published his second book, *The Order of Things* (*Les mots et les choses*), in which he had proclaimed the “death of man.” It was originally intended, as he confessed, for the consumption of two thousand academics; but the establishment thought otherwise and hurled the suddenly pleased Foucault on to the grand stage of intellectual stardom: *L'Express*, the high-selling weekly, titled an article “The Greatest Revolution since Existentialism” and splashed his portrait on the front page. Marie Chapsal, who had paid a late homage to Bataille in 1961, was the author of the review. The book appeared in April and immediately became a best seller.⁴⁵ Foucault now was the rage; every Parisian intellectual worth his salt had to provide some evidence that he or she had read the book.

The Order of Things is a quintessential academic piece: a 400-page comparative analysis of the recent taxonomic history of the social sciences, biology, and philology. Foucault had thought of it as a “game”—one of those games with which academics jockey for career advancement. It was meant to be a conventional display of “competence” for employees only. He would later confess that it was “fiction, pure and simple.”⁴⁶ The tone of the book is numbing and an air of distraught futility pervades the entire exercise. As *Madness and Civilization* was meant to trace the vagaries of the “other,” *The Order of Things*, instead, was written, according to his author, to reconstruct the history of the “same.” The search for “the same” allowed Foucault to engage in an interminable sandwiching of similes—of stories of a tale writing itself over again in a series of fragmented tales that form the same tale; of painters painting between mirrors bouncing and reflecting different glimpses of the original, et cetera. It’s the game of the “sign” and the “similar” yet again, which chase one another, and while doing so end up transcribing one timeless sequence—a yarn always identical to itself—that renders the historical dimension of human travails, in fact, meaningless.⁴⁷ “Man,” one heard again, “is but a certain laceration in the order of things”; he “is but a recent invention, barely two centuries old, a simple fold in our knowledge.”⁴⁸ Hero of “the same” is Don Quixote, “all his Being is but language, text, printed folios, history already transcribed.”⁴⁹ Not even economics—of which Foucault was spectacularly ignorant—was spared.⁵⁰ Of interest is, for instance, his unquestioning acceptance and Bataillean treatment of Malthus’s overpopulation postulate,

that is of the dogma that Nature is avaricious, and that there is not enough food to feed us all. Aside from having been systematically belied by experience, Malthusianism stands truly as the standard tenet—possibly the most heinous—of conservatism: it is the unfailing argument settler of all those fiercely bent on justifying the ineradicable presence of poverty.

In every instant of its history, humanity finds itself laboring under the threat of death: every population, if it does not find new resources, is destined to extinction. [. . .] It is no longer in the games of representation that the economy finds its principle, but on the side of this perilous realm where life vies with death. [. . .] *Homo oeconomicus* is not the subject engrossed with his own needs and the objects capable of satisfying them; he is the subject that spends, uses and loses his own life in order to escape the imminence of death.

Spin doctors and kingmaking publicists must have been searching this indigestible tome long and hard for a quotable passage by which to caption Foucault's sudden launch. Fortunately for all, it came at the very end:

Thus we may well bet that man will dissolve like a face drawn in the sand by the line of the sea.⁵¹

Good enough.

The Order of Things would later be unanimously acknowledged as Foucault's least incisive, least read, least quoted, and most forgettable work. And yet it was the title that marked the commercial break. This was the signal that the French establishment was opting out of its "dialogue" with Marxism, which had served as its counteraltar for dissent, and shifting its endorsement to the Foucauldian system. The discourse of Foucault appeared to be a more subtle, more flexible catalyst for "opposition" than the conventional and exclusivist rhetoric of class struggle and anticapitalist emancipation. It might have attracted disaffected Marxists, and thus divided their camp, and, better still, it did not seem to have any reformist agenda, no blueprint for social improvement. In the hands of Foucault, the mere notion of "revolution" or "politics" was bound to become something altogether different.

A study of political knowledge would concern itself neither with the moment of the emergence of revolutionary consciousness nor with the biographies of revolutionaries [. . .], it would examine the emergence of a discursive practice and a revolutionary knowledge which together generate strategies and give rise to a theory of society and of its transformation.⁵²

France's diehard leftists attacked the book head-on: they deplored in Foucault's "game" the absence of a "creative subject."⁵³ Evidently, they implied, a philosophy of protest and dissent needed some head upon which the opposition could pin responsibility: be it the slave driver, the capitalist, or what have you. These structuralist fables that told the story of Language writing itself and trapping human speech in the straitjacket of preexisting syntax and of "encoding" words; for the

traditional Left, these structuralist fables, well, they took the thrill out of the struggle. They cleared the arena of the villain—whatever he might be. Foucault kept his cool and slyly countered that “Marxism [existed] in the XIXth century thought, as a fish [existed] in water; that is, it [ceased] to breathe anywhere else.”⁵⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, Marxism’s incumbent icon of French dissidence, rankled like a wounded prima donna: Foucault, he maligned, was “the last barricade the bourgeoisie can erect against Marx.” “Poor bourgeoisie,” Foucault would retort years later, “if they needed me as a ‘barricade’, then they had already lost power!”⁵⁵ The trouble, of course, was that neither side was wrong.

Foucault should have been more candid and less modest: it was not Marxist dogma which Liberal democracies were afraid of, but of compact, unitary, mass movements of social resistance against privilege broadly defined. In the West, Marxism had effected this to a degree, but never overwhelmingly. Real complications do begin when the middle class unites with the workforce against the ruling elite (high finance and State bureaucracy), and the Foucauldian formula seemed an effective antidote against this positively frightening, yet somewhat remote, eventuality. The clans in the West had lost no power whatever, but Foucault was nonetheless “needed.” He was worth to them more than he knew.

Despite the editorial triumph, Foucault did not hide his embarrassment at this instantaneous, truly undeserved stardom, and grew “increasingly irritated by the uncomprehending enthusiasm of his new large public.”⁵⁶ So much so that, wholly dissatisfied with *The Order of Things*, he begged the publisher to discontinue it, in vain. Possibly out of shame for such a contrived success, he vanished for two years at the University of Tunis. Everyone agreed that “there was something enigmatic” about this abrupt departure for such an improbable post.⁵⁷

And so Foucault left, and missed the big show.

Europe's students' protests erupted in 1968.

The French establishment brought him back in October of the same year, enticing him with a chair of philosophy at the newly created campus at Vincennes outside the Parisian city walls, as an exquisite ploy to shove outside of town the dissenting rabble around the newly appointed (Bataillean) guru of revolt. Foucault accepted, and, flouting openness and merit like all academic barons, he exploited the power he was accorded by distributing all the available positions to his protégés—including his lover, Daniel Defert.⁵⁸

Campus life in the late sixties, especially at Vincennes, was indeed chaotic: daily protests, clashes with the riot police, slogan chanting, scuffles, insult hurling, class boycott, and tear gas galore. Allegedly, Foucault had “crazy fun” with all that. Playing his role of “the radical Prof.” to a T, “he had been arrested for the first time, and his status in the eyes of his *gauchiste* colleagues and comrades was enhanced accordingly.”⁵⁹ But, as much as he revered chaos, blood, madness, and sovereignty, he came to find the continual bedlam in the department and interruption of his lectures by the troublemakers so unbearable that he fled the campus rather swiftly.⁶⁰ Otherwise he was seen fronting a few political protests, absorbing on one occasion the shock of antiriot squads and hurling on another a few bricks at the police from the rooftop of his department, “careful not to dirty his

beautiful black velour suit.”⁶¹ For the rest of the time, he lived and breathed at the Bibliothèque Nationale: unlike Diogenes the Cynic, whose figure he said to admire, Foucault had not the slightest intention to live in tatters, spit on the rich, sleep in a tub, and masturbate by daylight in Place Vendôme—the times had changed.

Indeed, in December 1970 he was deemed worthy of the highest honors and came to be inducted into France’s foremost academic fraternity: the Collège de France. This was truly Foucault’s “public consecration.” The Collège was not part of the university system. It had no student body and awarded no degrees; its honorary panelists were simply required each year to deliver twelve two-hour lectures, which were open to the public.⁶² In his acceptance speech he sketched the (Bataillean) guidelines that would later find systematic formulation as his theory of Power/Knowledge.

[Foucault] implied, for one, that he had nevertheless broken the mold by going beyond scholarly discourse and resurrecting, in its place, a long-forgotten kind of “true” discourse, one filled with untamed power. Such a discourse, if one were unafraid of the dangers it carried with it, might provoke, as the works of the ancient poets had, ‘respect and terror.’ By inspiring human beings to think and act differently, it might even change the world, ‘weaving itself into the fabric of fate.’⁶³

What a ceremony this must have been, aglitter and swollen with all the pomp *power* could muster, enveloping this newly inducted “iconoclast” with a crowd of dignitaries donning their finest jewelry and costumes, while he preached about “power” and its forthcoming discourse. Past the shields and picket lines of riot police in combat gear, Parisians entered the halls of the Collège to partake in the liturgy of “some secular high mass.”⁶⁴ Rising like a feather from one glowing promotion to another, *he*, Foucault, was presently allowed to “lecture” *them* (the dignitaries) about the undisclosed potential of a (Bataillean) project that could provoke “respect and terror.” Whose? As if *he* did not know? As if *they* did know? Did not know that the “true discourse” was Bataille’s elegy of sodomy, Aztecs, eggs in urine, madness, excrement and “the threat to the civilized order?” Truly, whom was Foucault trying to dupe? If he himself was the first to recognize that the elites of power were clever, what could have possibly made him believe that he could outsmart them? They gave him fame in ’66, and tenure in ’68. He then thrust bricks at the cops, and they dubbed him academician of France. Wasn’t it obvious?

But, thus, the question is poorly cast. No one was fooling anybody: each was exploiting the other for an aim that was ultimately the same for both—to finish off that dream, scorned by Bataille, of converting all human activity into a movement, unconditional, for the good, away from privilege, sovereignty, and violence. Both the elites of power and the Foucauldians knew. And they struck their bargain under cover of deceit, the ones posing as enlightened rulers acknowledging dissent, and the others as proud dissenters claiming their due (i.e., academic chairs and honors).

Now that he had reached the summit of the *cursus honorum*, he began in his capacity of archbishop of counterpower to “issue statements” to the press though a spate of interviews. “We must free ourselves,” he intimated, “from cultural conservatism [. . .]. We must see our rituals for what they are: completely arbitrary things, tied to our bourgeois way of life; [. . .] it is good to transcend them in the manner of play, by means of game and irony: it is good to be dirty and bearded, to have long hair, to look like a girl when one is a boy (and vice versa); one must put ‘in play’, show up, transform, and reverse the system that quietly orders us about. As far as I am concerned that is what I do in my work.”⁶⁵ The “unity of society,” he insisted, “should not be considered except as something to be destroyed”: Foucault proposed a cultural “attack” against bourgeois mores via the shortcuts of drugs and intoxication, the breaking of sexual taboos and all prohibition, and an exploration of the communal dimension.⁶⁶ So, in brief, as a tenured destroyer, Foucault was but rehashing a “summer-of-love” version of the old matriarchal carnivals of sex inversion and blending it with a pinch of Gnostic banter and Bataillean “theopathy.” Nothing new under the sun, ever.

In 1971 he was invited by the Dutch TV to comment on the movements of (leftist) rebellion around the world, in the form of a one-on-one debate with Noam Chomsky, who could not comprehend the man. “I mean, I liked [Foucault] personally,” Chomsky later reminisced. “It’s just that I couldn’t make sense of him. It’s as if he was from a different species, or something.”⁶⁷

Foucault refused to outline any “ideal social model,” and went on to contemplate with approbation the possibility that the revolting masses in several international settings might institute against their former oppressors regimes of bloodiest vendetta. He would reiterate the same proposition in his dialogue with the French Maoists, envisioning with enthusiastic fascination a resumption of “popular justice,” as meted out in 1792 in post revolutionary France: a form of methodical lynching, whereby suspected class traitors “were forced to run a gauntlet of clubs, pikes, axes, knives, sabers, even, in one instance, a carpenter’s saw.” The upshot of this sanguinary chain assembly was a pulpy sauce of torn epidermis and quartered human limbs of what had been over a thousand men and women. As a counterreaction from the “core,” Foucault thought there was merit in releasing “a certain number of ancient rites which were features of ‘pre-judicial’ justice.”⁶⁸

Never capable of anything wholly inventive, Foucault was so mired in the footprints of Bataille that it wasn’t long before he longed to have a Gilles de Rais of his own. He, too, now wanted a bloody mascot. So he searched an archival collection of the nineteenth century until he exhumed the memoir of a young killer by the name of Paul Rivière. He got his pet criminal at last. A cruel creature with a penchant for torturing small animals, Rivière resolved one day in June 1835 to settle scores with existence: he slashed the head of his pregnant mother, bashed the skull of his brother, and carved out the head of his sister. Allegedly, he had wished to avenge his father, whom the mother had driven away. Once apprehended, in Sadean fashion, Rivière legitimized his crime by appealing

to the natural right of the stronger, and finally declared that he calmly awaited retribution for his deed through the cleansing of death. What had here resurfaced was but another Bataillean epic of the defiant bull, loving capriciously one last time as it disembowels the torero before charging, despaired, into the void of its preordained sacrifice. Foucault “thought that Rivière’s acts warranted [. . .] ‘a sort of reverence.’” The memoir was published in 1973 with a commentary by Foucault himself and the ethnographic annotations of a team of researchers he had assembled for the occasion. “So strong was their imaginary affective bond with the killer that the group members were even reluctant to take royalties from their published account of the case, and thought of using them to finance a foundation named after him.”⁶⁹

Rivière’s memoir, [Foucault] declared in [. . .] an interview, was “so strong and so strange that the crime ends up not existing any more.”⁷⁰

None of this, of course, has found its way into the edited, bowdlerized primers and readers of Foucault in the United States. Instead, what has been cleared though censorial customs is Foucault’s depiction of the ways in which modern rationality, embodied in the bureaucracy of control, has vexed and tormented the refractory souls of society: the weak, the indigent, and the insame. The editors would manage to sell the Bataillean project, wrapped in Foucauldian packaging, as a cry of universal compassion raised against the cold cruelty of the modern “system.” Formidable.

The years 1971–73 was Foucault’s biennium of political activism. The stated goal of his militancy was the empowerment of “others.” Of these “others,” prison convicts were especially dear to his heart. These years were particularly rife with prison mutinies, and Foucault clearly interpreted the phenomenon as heterogeneity pressing insistently against the fences of the disciplinarian society. He would frequently take to the streets to manifest in defense and on behalf of the prisoners’ rights and demands.⁷¹ Indeed, the study he would conduct of the world of the prison was going to affect deeply his late career. And, again, Bataille, the master, had already dropped a hint even in this regard. “Intellectual despair,” Bataille had written in 1929, “ushers neither in cowardice nor in reverie, but in violence. Thus, it is out of the question to forsake certain investigations. It is just a matter of knowing how we may exercise our rage, of knowing whether we shall like lunatics circle around the prisons, or topple them altogether.”⁷²

“The publication of *Surveiller et punir (Discipline and Punish)* in 1975 was surrounded by considerable publicity.”⁷³ In this book, Foucault delivered his theory of Power/Knowledge, which, further refined in the following years, has ever since become his pièce de résistance. The book featured yet another re-elaboration of Bataille’s theory of power within the framework of the “disciplinarian environment.” In this sequel, instead of being the victim of the *clinical* system, the bloody madness of the core was cast as the victim of rational organization within the *carceral* environment: Foucault was presently escorting the reader from the asylum to the jail—and the message was going to remain the same.

Discipline and Punish chronicled the ways and means by which the modern penitentiary institutions have since the seventeenth century—at the dawn of modernity—regimented the untamed power of humanity’s rebellious animality. The book opened with a detailed, almost voyeuristic, description, for its insistence on anatomical thoroughness, of the torture and execution of Damiens, a regicide in premodern France. The episode would lead one to believe that the study would be a screaming denunciation of the savage cruelty of feudalism, and of its demoniac recourse to atrocious forms of capital punishment. And as such, indeed, the whole of Foucault’s work is generally presented to the student audience of America. But this is a selective, often incompetent and ultimately misleading, presentation of Foucault’s intent, which was in truth wholly the opposite.

Foucault was once more re-evoking the Bataillean fascination with ceremonial torture. He revisited the old reels: again, the reader was shown the thronging of villagers around the bonfire of sacrificial execution, ready to commune before death, each celebrant soon to be bound to the other by the vertiginous glue of spilled blood and torn innards.⁷⁴ Until the late Renaissance, this religious appetite of the mobs for blood had been satisfied one way or another, but then things changed. Modernity cauterized the killing; in the name of “reason,” it made it “humane.” It was this particular development—the aseptic art of murdering and reforming—which *Discipline and Punish* promised to dissect. Foucault found this novel “economics of punishment” culpable of having displaced the solemn and sovereign killing of throbbing flesh.⁷⁵

And a fact is yet unmistakable: in a matter of decades, the mangled body, the dismembered body—the body amputated, [. . .] and exposed, had disappeared. The body as a conspicuous target of penal repression has disappeared. [. . .] In the execution-show a numbing horror shot out of the scaffold; it enveloped both the henchman and the condemned.⁷⁶

Foucault bemoaned the institution of regimented exercise, schedule, penal regulation, and orderly management of the convicts, all of which to him were “absolutely incompatible with”⁷⁷ the heroic explosion of what he called *l'éclat des supplices*—“the glimmering outburst of death-by-torture.” To the latter he seemed not at all opposed. “Modern justice,” he wrote, “and those meting it out are, as it were, ashamed to punish [. . .]. Punishment has gone from being an art of unbearable sensations to an economics of suspended rights.”⁷⁸

Liberalism is utopia. It has been the dream—or rather the nightmare—of encompassing the whole of social life into relations mediated by market transactions, and the results so far have been a progressive destruction of communal sentiment, of the workers’ dignity, and of the environment.⁷⁹ Liberalism has also been the nightmare of organizing this economic crippling of society into a self-disciplining grid of commandments, which would have relieved the policing organs of the bulk of their monitoring duties—all in the name of

(mechanical) efficiency. This transformation is sufficiently known, and its critique is not at all a prerogative of the postmodern Left. What is peculiar to Bataille's and Foucault's denunciation of Liberalism's criminal philistinism is the substitution of prophylactic methods of control for the sovereign ways of violence.

The utopia of the judiciary pudicity: to take away existence while preventing pain to transpire, to deprive of all rights without inflicting suffering, to impose sanctions bereft of sufferance. [. . .] Double process: erasure of the spectacle, annulment of pain.⁸⁰

In the sovereign days of old, for instance, the executioner would open the stomach of the victim and tear out the entrails with haste, so that the condemned "might have the time to see."⁸¹ Crime and punishment fused into "atrocities, not as an obscure acquiescence in the *lex talionis*," but rather as the affirmation by power of its armed splendor. Following Bataille, Foucault recapitulated: "The form of monarchical sovereignty, while projecting from the side of the sovereign the surcharge of a bursting, unlimited power—a power irregular and discontinuous—allowed on the side of the subjects the latitude for a constant illegality; the latter was like a correlate of this type of power."⁸²

Foucault made an insistent use of *dialectics*, especially in connection with the suggestive tension between the heterogeneity of the master and that of the slave. The epic of crime, to Foucault as for Bataille, was a beautiful duel among sovereign equals, forever unresolved: the baroque romance of the castigating prince and of his "correlate," the low-class assassin. The popular success of this endless saga "is, apparently, the discovery of the beauty and the greatness of crime; it is in fact the affirmation that the greatness, too, has a right to crime and that the latter becomes itself the exclusive privilege of those that are truly great."⁸³ Bataille had said it before, and Foucault parroted: the populace had no fear of capital executions.⁸⁴ They were an ancestral, indispensable rite. Hence, modern-day reformers, recognizing this difficulty, saw to it that punishment would not find itself "concentrated in a few privileged nodes," and that it would be "arranged in homogeneous circuits susceptible of operating everywhere, in continuous fashion and down to the finest grain of the body social."⁸⁵

Foucault went on to recount that the clinical eye of the bureaucracy became far more preoccupied with the "*soul*" of the subject than with his body, which presently had to vanish from view, with its secretions, decay, and organic tallying of death. Through a "metamorphosis of the punitive methods," the attention of the henchman shifted from the physique to the "heart, the mind, the will" of the victim.⁸⁶ The disciplinarian apparatus took hold of the convict's body and began to fashion it, so to speak. To discipline, drill and train it. Until something singular came to pass. One modern day, this tormented body found itself "invested by power relations"; it was being "plunged into a political field."⁸⁷

Now, without the preparatory reading of Bataille, a declaration of this sort would seem unintelligible. The reader wondered: Whose power? And whence

did this power issue? Was Foucault speaking of an elitist power? Of a metaphysical principle? Which?

In the introductory of *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault had just begun to rescript the novella of Bataillean *pouvoir*. Let us see how the fantasy unfolded.

That is to say that there may be a “knowledge” of the body which is not exactly the science of its functioning. [. . .] This knowledge and this mastery constitute what one may call the political technology of the body.⁸⁸

Phenomenal language that he was creating.

So what of this “mastery,” of this mysterious “power?”

In sum, we must admit that this power is exercised more than it is possessed, that it is not the “privilege” acquired or conserved of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its own strategic positions.⁸⁹

This is now easy: two characters lead this scene. Bataille’s crushed and diffuse energy of the core (“violence”), which is no longer truculently wielded but merely “exercised” (as “power”); and Foucault’s absurd suggestion that “the dominant class” is, in the end, not overwhelmingly “powerful.” The elite truly ends up dominating nothing, if, as he held, it is but the outcome, one of a myriad, of “the strategic positions” of this indefinite power. Now, why the *real* dominant classes should like to see this type of “discourse” prevail in the classroom is not difficult to fathom. Notice, however, that Foucault had altered the Bataillean metaphor. The original clash between heterogeneous forces and the bulldozing might of the Liberal State gave way to a different theory. In Foucault, one could say that the plane of existence became the bottom of a sea of lifeblood, which modernity had then begun to enclose as a sort of lagoon with a view, as it were, to exploiting the force of the sea for its own energetic requirements. The shattering encounter of steel and billowing fluid and the unpredictable swirling that ensued could be seen condensing at any time in an innumerable variety of configurations (power formations)—antagonistic ones—liable to shift and dissolve at every turn.

[Power relations] define innumerable points of accretion, loci of instability, each being a potential trigger of conflict and of struggle, which might set off an inversion, at least a transient one, of the strength ratios. The reversing of these “micropowers” does not therefore obey the law of the all-or-nothing. [. . .] One should rather admit that power produces knowledge. [. . .] There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor is there knowledge that does not constitute at the same time power relations. These relations of ‘power/knowledge’ should not therefore be analyzed by starting from a knowing subject who would be free or unfree with respect to the system of power.⁹⁰

“To analyze the political investment of [. . .] the microphysics of power,” Foucault went on, one had to abandon “the violence/ideology opposition, the

metaphor of property, the model of the contract or of the conquest.”⁹¹ This was no longer the face of Bataille, but a structuralist decomposition thereof.⁹² The Marxists were right: Foucault had made *the subject*, with his crimes and tragedies, disappear—he was gone. But so was the legacy of sovereignty, the temptation of fascism, the king, the ruffians, or a piece of the truth. All gone. Even “power,” for that matter: Foucault had pulverized it into “micropowers.”

Notice the advice: we are encouraged to drop altogether the notion of oppression, ideology and property; in other words, we have to cease thinking that there are clans dominating and enforcing rules in order to shield, and perpetuate, their privilege. There may be networks, conceded Foucault, that seem to agglomerate more power than others, but this occasional condensation reflects a common state of disequilibrium, of imbalance that is a natural outcome of this unrestricted flow of primordial power (whose nature, however, remained unaccounted for). Foucault called this undue accumulation of power at a given node of the network “metapower.” “But this metapower,” he qualified, “can only take hold and service its footing where it is rooted in a whole series of multiple and indefinite power relations that supply the necessary basis for the great negative forms of power.”⁹³ This is a self-contained circuit, without exit. Power is ceaselessly processed and reprocessed by varying aggregations of social control (for reasons Foucault cannot explain), and even when we perceive that a particular group dominates, he suggested that this predominance is but the apex of a series of power relations that have formed at the periphery, and have ramified therefrom to the center and *not vice versa*. In other words, there isn’t a power structure oppressing from the center; but only a diffuse pool of lifeblood, hardening itself in chance patterns that reflect only one struggle: the discourse of reason versus the fire of blood; and each of us may find himself or herself at one time or another on one or the other side of the barricade. In other words, we could all be subjugators. And those wielding power with infamy could go free, for the Foucaudian theory exonerated them from ever becoming accountable to society.

This was “a game” all right. Other than his forensic narratives, Foucault never offered historical verification of any sort. Bataille had attempted to poison the well by telling a twisted tale of twisted truth, but with Foucault, the system had shifted gears: the elite came, in fact, to commission a novel from a theorist (Foucault), who ripped off the theory of a novelist (Bataille).

In *Discipline and Punish*, the body politic became the collection of our human bodies shaped by power and stamped with knowledge—the Power/Knowledge of the Leviathan-State.⁹⁴ But since power was supposedly diffused, the tension, again, found no solution. Power obtruded, power coerced, and the inherent virtues of heterogeneity, thus squeezed and constrained, exploded, spitting the victims back at the oppressor in a collective reflux of defiance. Dialectics, again. To the Bataillean Foucault, carnality is life, blood is life; and these new, victimized, tamed, and feeble bodies of modernity were the larval integuments of souls that have been whitewashed by the ethic of the bourgeois. Inverting the terms of the famous Gnostic adage, Foucault sentenced: the soul is the prison of the body.⁹⁵

Discipline ‘fabrics’ individuals. [. . .] It trains the confused multitude of bodies and forces. [. . .] It is not triumphant power, which building upon its excess can trust its omnipotence; it is a modest suspicious power, which functions as a calculated, but permanent economy. These are humble modalities, minor procedures, compared with the majestic rituals of sovereignty or the great apparatuses of the state.⁹⁶

The bodies have been “disciplined” and cut with the double-edged lancet of “docility” and “utility.” For Foucault, one could no longer speak of “slavery.” Slavery was a violent appropriation of bodies. Modernity, on the other hand, has striven to “conceal the chains,” as Jünger would say.⁹⁷ Likewise, Foucault remarked that it was the “elegance itself of discipline to be able to dispense with [slavery’s] costly and violent relationship, while being capable at the same time to obtain results at least as great.”⁹⁸ By means of a thorough chequerwork and gridding (*quadrillage*) of individual behaviors, this new Foucauldian power, characterized by “a scattered localization,” has proceeded to “fabricate” individuals in special “monitoring” facilities (the prisons) by exercising what he called “cellular” discipline. “Compared to the majestic rituals of sovereignty,” disciplinary power “owed its success to the use of simple tools” and to an artful application of the “hierarchical” principle. Echoing Bataille once more, Foucault accused “this machinery of control” of “homogenizing,” of “normalizing.”⁹⁹ But, disingenuously, he cautioned: “One must cease always to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes’, it ‘represses’. [. . .] In fact, power produces; it produces reality, it produces fields of objects and rituals of truth. [. . .] [Power] has its principle less in a person than in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, of surfaces, of lights, of gazes. [. . .] It doesn’t matter who exercises power. Any individual, almost at random, can run the machine.”¹⁰⁰

“Any individual, at random?”

In the final part of *Surveiller et punir*, Foucault ran ahead of himself. Indeed, he reissued the corroborated, notorious and conspiratorial hypothesis according to which the prison, because it regurgitates inmates that have learned no useful trade and cannot perform any useful task, fulfills in fact its covert role as “a factory of delinquents.” These squalid byproducts make up an army of derelicts, which the system itself may draw from as a convenient source of pimps, prostitutes, scabs, terrorists, *agents provocateurs* and assassins. By so arguing, in fact, Foucault ran the serious risk of wrecking his entire thesis:

The prison has succeeded very well in breeding delinquency, [. . .] a species of illegality politically and economically less dangerous—ultimately manipulable; it has succeeded in producing delinquents—a milieu that is apparently marginalized, yet centrally controlled.¹⁰¹

So it seemed, after all, that “metapower” is actually capable and *willing* to exercise control by infiltrating and sabotaging this milieu from within (*noyautage*)—which is the dirty work proper of a State’s secret services. The end product being the studied cultivation of “a redoubtable force of riot and plunder”; a mafia so to speak, through which, “the illegality of the dominant class” could “canalize and recuperate the enormous profits” of sexual pleasure, arms trade, drugs traffic, and

alcohol bootlegging.¹⁰² “It is at this time,” Foucault wrote, “that we witness the direct and institutional coupling of police and delinquency. Disquieting moment in which criminality becomes one of the cogs of power. A figure had haunted the previous times, that of the monstrous king, source of all justice and yet fouled up by crime; a new fear makes its appearance, that of a sinister entente between those who uphold the law and those who violate it. The Shakespearean age during which sovereignty struggled with abomination within the same personage is over.”¹⁰³

What happened to that “random individual” fit to govern on any given day? How does he play into all this? And what of the fact that this culture of illegality has been a stable and defining feature of our Liberal democracies for roughly two hundred years, with no possibility of change on the horizon yet? It looks as though the magic of dialectics has been out of commission on that front, as much as everywhere else. But could Foucault care? Most likely not, lost as he was in his Bataillean adventure (funded by France’s arch-disciplinarian State), whose sole concrete suggestions was the vaporous hearkening to a Shakespearean age of monstrous kings. And so it was. This odd treatise of social sci-fi ended on a contradictory note. Details. One last Bataillean rant with a dash of postmodernism and it would be over with. The book would sell anyway; “power” would see to it:

Rather than a weakness or a malady, one must see [in crime] an energy that reaffirms itself, an ‘explosive protestation of human individuality’, which, doubtless, exercises upon everyone a strange fascination. [. . .] It may thus happen that crime constitutes a political instrument that shall eventually be as precious for the liberation of our society as it has been for the emancipation of blacks.¹⁰⁴

Here were, in embryo, all the defining ingredients for the contemporary politics of postmodernism: the aesthetic wink to violence, conservative pessimism, and the fixation with racial divides. In his *Two Lectures* (1977), Foucault added the final touches to his theory of power. Since he had to account in some fashion for the struggles of the world, he devised for the purpose the notion of “disqualified, subjugated knowledges” on the one hand, and “erudite discourse” on the other. The former is a re-elaboration of Bataille’s “labyrinth of knowledges,” and is here re-proposed as the broad category encompassing the talk and speech of the people. It is folk tales chanted at the periphery of the networks of power, or “popular knowledge”: the testimony of madmen and assassins caught on record. But, Foucault warned, “it is far from being a general common sense knowledge, [. . .] it is on the contrary *a particular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity and which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it*. It is through the re-appearance of these [. . .] disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work.”¹⁰⁵ “Erudite knowledge” was the sophisticated syntax of discourse which the École Normale had drilled into Foucault, and which he could not forbear from using, since he knew nothing else (a fitting application of Power/Knowledge).

“Let us call genealogy,” he continued, “the union of erudite knowledge and local memories which allow us to establish a historical knowledge of struggles

and to make use of this knowledge *tactically* today.”¹⁰⁶ One ultimately learned from the genealogy that “differential knowledges” were “incapable of unanimity [and] harshly opposed to anything surrounding them.” Almost apologetically, Foucault justified this last claim by adducing the fear that if we were to “disinter,” “accredit and put into circulation” a particular knowledge, we would be running the risk of “re-codifying” and “re-colonizing” everything in the name of this new discovery—and that was for him a risk never worth taking. He said so before: the unity of society and the “unitary discourse” must be destroyed.

But then the question arises: Why disinter a “subjugated knowledge” in the first place, if not to unite it with other tales of suffering? Because then, as the postmodern answer logically follows, we would be appealing inevitably to a universal feeling of justice, and, as we have repeatedly argued hitherto, this was everything Bataille and Foucault lived to shatter. Thus, the postmodern name of the game was a mock war of the knowledges. The marginalized tribespeople of the subjugated “lores,” each brandishing the weapon of a disinterred tradition, were to crouch in their dimly lit corner and consume themselves with resentment, growling and ever prone to pounce on the “other”—especially the “Whites.” This was the discourse that was going to be imported in America and finessed into the talk of tribal mistrust.

It will be no part of our concern to provide a solid and homogeneous theoretical terrain for all these dispersed genealogies, nor to descend upon them from on high with some kind of halo of theory that would unite them.¹⁰⁷

At bottom, Foucault’s pamphlet commanded that we cease to ask “the labyrinthine and unanswerable question: ‘who has power and what does he have in mind? What is the aim of someone possessing power? [. . .] Why do certain people want to dominate, [and] what is their overall strategy?’” Instead, for Foucault we should ask ourselves “how things work at the level of ongoing subjugation, at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted [. . .] processes which dictate our behaviors.”¹⁰⁸ Again, anyone approaching the study of power by localizing it in “central” loci, instead of apprehending its virtue to circulate in capillary fashion commits for Foucault a gross methodological error and thereby “impoverishes the question of power.” “Power,” he repeated, “functions in the form of a chain”; “and not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising power. They are not only its inert or consenting targets; they are also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application.”¹⁰⁹

If you ask me, ‘Does this new technology of power take its historical origin from an identifiable group of individuals who decide to implement its so as to further their interests or facilitate their utilization of the social body?’ Then I would say ‘No’. These tactics were invented and organized from starting points of local conditions. [. . .] They took place in a piecemeal fashion, prior to any class strategy designed to weld them into, vast, coherent ensembles.¹¹⁰

The year was 1977, and the English translation of *Surveiller et punir* became available in America. A decade after the Parisian launch, the U.S. establishment co-opted the French *philosophe*, and booked him solid for a tour of American academe. U.C. Berkeley, of course, as counterculture's self-professed School of Athens seemed to have had first dibs on playing alma mater to the new French recruit.

Students weaned on the Talking Heads and David Lynch flocked to his public appearances, cherishing this bald savant as a kind of postmodernist sphynx, a metaphysical eraserhead whose demeanor was weird, whose utterances were cryptic—and whose philosophy, mirabile dictu, could nevertheless be summed up in a simple mantra, consisting of two words: "power" and "knowledge" . . . Bodies! Pleasures! Torture! Had philosophy ever sounded so sexy?¹¹¹

This was going to be easy, and rich. The Yankees bought the Frenchman a ticket to ride so that aging beatniks could get a facelift, the angered "minorities" a custom-tailored discourse, and the (oppressing) authorities a nice break. In fact, to American eyes, the books of Foucault were but one long, sophisticated indictment of the hated Nurse Ratchet, the villain of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The public presently had the opportunity of redigesting the movie, but with sophistication and learning, indulging, once more, that anguishing feeling that we are all like madmen trapped in the asylum under the shaping watch of this manipulative, controlling, and freakish nunlike warden.

It was then all too simple to guess what the politically correct authority of Affirmative Action was going to do with the notion of "subjugated knowledges": instead of attacking the root of the problem, and unearthing brutally, once and for all, in a public and diffuse mass séance of collective culpability the deep reasons behind America's congenital racism; instead of tackling the malady at the core, spiritually and economically, the establishment opted for window dressing, and allowed the creation of a slew of facilities, departments, and curricula devoted to cultural, gay, women, African-American, Hispanic, Middle-Eastern, and diversity Studies. Deep down, no one bought it, of course: for all that, America kept her distance from gays, minorities, and diversity in general as decidedly as ever. And the more strident and uncomfortable the symbiosis grew with time, the phonier the profession of a generalized commitment "to diversity." The appropriate recruiting institutions were staffed with middle- and upper-class whites, and, to a far less extent, with nonwhites, who acknowledged with lukewarm reserve the overtures granted them. Thus was fomented this bunker-mentality of chronically simmering hostility that characterizes America's professional environment—an armed truce, so to speak, concluded against a background of ever-growing incomprehension between *all* the factions, including the "diverse" ones, which have come not infrequently to battle one another over stakes, attention, and the financial allotment of Affirmative Action.

This was yet in the future, but Foucault played it cool like the savvy political animal that he was. Shortly after his American adoption, he began to recant

some of his Bataillean creed. He could well afford to do so, considering how far he (and his Bataille) had journeyed. With the affected tone of cautionary introspection, he began to sound a warning against “the fascism in us all.”¹¹² This was clearly a correction that, sooner or later, had to be made, considering, as mentioned earlier, how unconditional devotion to sovereignty, blood, and Aztec sacrifice would naturally place anyone in dangerous propinquity to the Nazis. “Nazism,” Foucault fawned, “was doubtless the most cunning and the most naïve combination of the fantasies of the blood and the paroxysms of a disciplinary power. A eugenic order of society [. . .], in the guise of an unrestricted state control. [. . .] It is an irony of history that the Hitlerite politics of sex remained an insignificant practice while the blood myth was transformed into the greatest bloodbath in recent memory.” “And yet,” he went on to retract, “to conceive the category of the sexual in terms of the law, death, blood and sovereignty—whatever the references to Sade and Bataille, and however one might gauge their ‘subversive’ influence—is in the last analysis a historical ‘retroversion.’”¹¹³

There, it was done: Bataille was somewhat disowned and his phantasmagoria discarded as “retroversion.” Foucault finally acknowledged that we could never go back to those sovereign empires—they had vanished. Even the Marquis was forsaken; admittedly Foucault reneged him with ability: “In Sade,” he now wrote, “[power] is an exercise [carried] to a point where it is no longer anything but a unique and naked sovereignty: an unlimited right of all-powerful monstrosity.”¹¹⁴ In all honesty, this was Bataille’s critique, but it did not matter: conceptually, none of Foucault’s work is anywhere original. And besides, virtually no American knew who Bataille was, so . . . Enough of the Sadean fascination, then. Foucault was presently among Anglo-Saxon Puritans, who ordered tools from him, not decadent aestheticism. Foucault complied and jettisoned, remorselessly, the hero of his youth: in the end, the Marquis was but a cerebral cur himself, was he not?

Too bad for the literary deification of Sade, too bad for Sade: he bores us. He’s a disciplinarian, a sergeant of sex, an accountant of the ass and its equivalents.¹¹⁵

Very well; now, where did one go from here?

Nowhere. The Foucauldian mantra had exhausted its mission already. The fans were humble, the fans were naïve: they wanted advice, direction, a code of mores, something. Little did they understand, however, the presence of the “postmodernist sphinx” on their homeland. Foucault hadn’t come to provide any of that. Mores? Conduct? Yes, he had said to dress like a boy if you’re a girl, grow a beard and stink, get stoned, be promiscuous, and “resist at the margins.” Fine, but America had done all that already. What next?

Nothing.

The eighties had arrived. California, thankfully, had come to his rescue when in Europe he was swiftly passing out of vogue.¹¹⁶ Foucault, the man, for his part, dissolved himself in the gay bath-houses of the Castro District in San Francisco,

across the Bay Bridge from his new academic bastion. Allegedly he engaged in sadomasochistic dissipation so long, so intensely, and so carelessly that he untimely lost his life to it. It is AIDS that would finish him in 1984. But in so dying, he, at least, had been consistent: he played the system all right but lived to destroy himself in the end, to destroy life as he had sermonized from early on. Indeed, he had already attempted suicide several times in his twenties. In the venues of passion and sexual torture of San Francisco, “You meet men who are to you as you are to them: nothing but a body with which combinations and productions of pleasure are possible”; it was “regrettable,” Foucault added, that such places did not exist for heterosexuals.¹¹⁷

Regardless, his disciples kept tugging at the master’s sleeves for answers. How do I behave?

In reading a series of late interviews conducted by his Berkleyite adorers, it is almost endearing to watch these professors—grown, educated men—begging “this metaphysical eraserhead” from France to tell them what to do with their lives. When the topic came to revolve around ethics, the interviewers, silently adverting to Foucault’s homosexuality, inquired timidly whether a return to the Greek society would be a good idea—after all, ancient Greece tolerated pederasty and tamed forms of matriarchal worship. “No!” thundered the master: “The Greek ethics of pleasure is linked to a virile society, to dyssymetry, exclusion of the other, an obsession with penetration, and a kind of threat of being dispossessed of your own energy, and so on. All that is quite disgusting!”¹¹⁸ The disciples tried one more time when the discussion meandered through Christianity—which Foucault accused in typical Bataillean fashion of being the wretched practice of renouncing the self—and asked him how one was to “create himself.” Create yourself, Foucault hissed, “as a work of art.”¹¹⁹ Which was an inexpensive way out that mustn’t have pleased the pupils. How could it? What “art?” According to which canons? And we are back to square one. A tedious tautology.

Foucault had no more counsel to give; he never had any. Tiredly, he advised the students toward the end to read with care the works of the Austrian school of market Liberalism,¹²⁰ as if they could learn therefrom new ways of achieving freedom. Intriguing piece of advice: to think one could round off one’s (Bataillean) conception of liberty by reading the prophets of the most conservative schools of economics was strange—especially coming from a disciple of Bataille, who loathed utilitarian economics. . . . But none of this should have raised eyebrows anymore. At this stage, Bataillean sovereignty had been disfigured by the late Foucauldian discourse into full-blown postmodernism: the blood thirst had been diluted in an insipid decoction of political correctness and a libertarian fancy for ethnic marketing. What else could Foucault have thought of to appeal to his U.S. audience? What more intuitive approximation of Bataille’s labyrinth was there in American imagination other than *the network of the market*?

Foucault has been the protagonist of a latter-day hero worship, and, rare is the case when such beatification isn’t fraudulent. The fraudulent nature of the Foucauldian system had become patent to many, especially in the final years,

when, feeling death drawing close, Foucault revealed, as if answering at long last the question he had until then done his best to circumvent, that “there is no piece of conduct more beautiful or, consequently, more worthy of careful thought than suicide.” “One should work on one’s suicide throughout one’s life.”¹²¹ Such were his parting words.

So much for compassion. And so much for a “theory” of dissent. To the last, he appealed and defended “everyone’s right to kill himself,” and swore half-jokingly that had he won money at the lottery, he would have invested it to set up special institutes, where the sorrowful could come and amuse themselves to death in protracted weekends or month-ends, dissolving themselves in “suicide-festivals” or “suicide-orgies,” perhaps with drugs, and then disappearing.¹²² He had done so himself, and, apparently, he was not dissatisfied with the outcome. In any case, his had been an extraordinary career.

Extraordinary in every sense. Not least for having bamboozled the vast majority of academics—the Americans above all—into believing that he was an advocate of life-loving justice, when, in fact, Foucault’s Power/Knowledge is but the modern adjustment of the Bataillean Dionysian delirium, which itself is perhaps the most important and creative reconstruction of infernal worship in the modern age. Still, today, no one really reads, knows, or comprehends Bataille. No one believes the flight of his headless monster to be more than a straggling epicycle around the galaxy of postmodernism. But Foucault is indecipherable without the knowledge of Bataille. And much of the present-day confusion stems from this unperformed archeology of Foucault, which is taken instead along conventional dead-ends, thereby squandering precious time in pedantic disquisitions on Nietzsche, Kant, Hegel, or structuralism.

In sum, the Foucauldian discourse has been successful in the United States for a variety of reasons. We may identify four chief ones. From the academics’ viewpoint, it has allowed the old leftist vanguard to save status and perquisites by going postmodern. Second, it has provided a ready-made “philosophy” capable of freezing racial divides in the classroom and the workplace, by articulating an imaginary scale of differentiated “knowledges,” which have then been used to project a fake sense of empowerment among the disadvantaged groups (the discussion of this aspect will be refined in the next chapter). Third, it has been highly beneficial to the authorities by preventing any comprehension or curiosity as to how power truly functions. And fourth, it has pandered to the late worship of globalization, which has made much of marketing’s and the free market’s alleged ability to erase national boundaries, diffuse “other” cultures, and defy centralization (this, too, is an important development that will be dealt with in chapter 7).

This mere recapitulation confirms that, if anything, the Foucauldian discourse was from the outset an exploit of propagandistic creation. Though, *formally*, it might have issued from the methodological spheres of philosophy and literary criticism, its practical strength resided in its purely *political instrumentality*. As such, indeed, it has been used with spectacular effects in the contemporary empire of the modern epoch. And the succulent paradox of it all was that the

narrative power—the *essence*—of this unique propagandistic tool was the socio-logical reverie of a forgotten pornographer.

The next chapter is a survey of the various treatments that this singular discourse has undergone at the hands of contemporary postmodern thinkers in a number of disciplines—treatments that have themselves laid waste to the intellectual terrain whereupon dissent should wage its daily battle against injustice, prevarication, and mendacity. The consequences of this discomfiture will be assessed in chapter 9.

CHAPTER 7

The “Mocking Varlets” of the Postmodern Left: Political Correctness, Education, and *Empire*

And next come our philosophers, reverenced for their gowns and beards; they look upon themselves as the only knowledgeable ones and all others as fleeting shadows. How sweet it is to see them rave while they frame in their heads innumerable worlds. [. . .] In the meantime Nature laughs at their conjectures. In fact, as proof of their not knowing anything with certainty would suffice their arguing about the explanation of every single phenomenon. These, though they know nothing, profess to know everything; not knowing even themselves and, at times, not being aware of the pothole or the block that lies in their way, whether because they’re half blind, or because their wits wander in some other place, contend that they have discovered ideas, . . . separate forms. [. . .] Most of all, they loathe the profane populace.

Erasmus, *In Praise of Folly*¹

The use of the adjective “postmodern” punctuated the launch of a vogue. It was not attributed to Foucault himself—who, fearing to lose ground, mocked the cliché at once—but to a massive nouvelle vague of second-rate imitators of his, pundits like Lyotard, or Baudrillard.² The United States welcomed them all. Postmodernism was a French import, which followed in the wake of the Foucauldian sensation, but the phenomenon has been unquestionably American. Postmodernism became the new mannerism of the Left. And before one could begin to assess what it was actually made of, academia was busy reconfiguring curricula, form, and logistics around this American prototype running on a Foucaldian engine: the institution of “cultural studies.”

But in people’s heads the confusion was as thick as ever. “Postmodern politics,” some said, “eludes easy definition. No one goes around campaigning for postmodern politics.”³ Indeed, postmodernism had no platforms, no grass roots—it was just a syllabus. Thin and contrived, and pedagogically immaterial, like the

credits of distance learning. Yet postmodernism's jocosity and fictional treatment of traditional academic materials have been possibly one of its most attractive features for so many students. Scores of them, not quite sure how to steer through the obscenities of modernity, have found it easy to opt for this seemingly irreverent, libertarian ethos of erudite mischief, which taunts for the sake of taunting in a world environment that makes little sense. However, as argued in the previous chapter, it was political expediency, rather than taste or appeal, that brought the Foucauldian discourse to the neighborhood.

Postmodernism became a byword for relativism. It followed from Foucault's Power/Knowledge that what has been customarily called "truth" was, to him, the "truth" of the disciplinarian elites.

'Truth' is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and of operation of statements. 'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extends it. A 'regime' of truth.⁴

It was *their* "truth," versus the aboriginal (Bataillean) and heterogeneous "truth" of the "insane" ones. In America, Bataillean "heterogeneity" vanished from the charts completely. "Their" truth came to be treated just as *a* truth, one of many. Or rather, "their truth" became the truth of the middle-aged white Anglo-Saxon man. It was the truth, the discourse of the slave owner, of the genocidal maniac—it was, patently, a lie.

But neither Bataille nor Foucault had by any means operated under the presumption that their project could also be reduced to a relativistic exercise; they knew better, they had hoped for something better—that is, more destructive—than that. And, in a sense, their expectations have not gone wholly unfulfilled. So Foucault became the hero of the new American postmodern converts. They mistook him for a Christlike radical and applauded for him heartily. They said of him with admiration that he was "not concerned with the approval of the established regimes." That made "him the *bête noire* of mainstream or liberal political theorists."⁵ They liked his rebel antics and all this saga of "subjugated knowledges"; they could easily fit into its weave their late struggles fought in the name of feminism, homosexuality, and ethnicity. But what they relished even more was Foucault's Lutheranism, as it were: his claim, that is, that the "disqualified multitudes" no longer needed the intellectual-priest to interpret the gospel of rebellion on their behalf. This was the seduction of "power": thanks to Foucault, the postmodern professor could fuse himself or herself (figuratively mostly) with the masses and dream he or she could harness the collective energy to a general movement of destabilization, of resistance.⁶

So far so good.

And it was from Foucauldian statements such as those on "truth" (and his *Two Lectures*, in general) that the institution of "cultural studies" took its first (curricular) steps.

Whose culture shall be the official one and whose shall be subordinated? What cultures shall be regarded as worthy of display and which shall be hidden? Whose history shall be remembered and whose forgotten? What images of social life shall be projected and which shall be marginalized? What voices shall be heard and which will be silenced? Who is representing whom and on what basis? THIS IS THE REALM OF CULTURAL POLITICS.⁷

Opposition to the State, as it was led by the Left in the sixties, had broken down; it did rebound in the seventies, wholly deflated and hardly recognizable, in the form of a resigned concern with cultural difference. This dried up and stagnating pool of resentment, needed then, some kind of institutional framework, and Foucauldian language served the purpose. Like their French counterparts in Vincennes a decade earlier, American radicals were co-opted and shoved into readymade academic structures, where they would be tasked to disperse energy by needling new, countless yarns of postcolonial oppression, *one at a time*—the tacit clause being that such threads were never to be spun together on a single loom.

In time, Foucault's quasi-system of thought, not surprisingly, underwent an evolution not dissimilar from that experienced a century ago by Marxism. Being in the nature and shape of a creed (for which God the One = Power), it has since lent itself to manipulation and multitudinous interpretations, each of which has come accordingly to spawn its own sect within the movement. For instance, some postmodernists have opposed the modern lifestyle and their aversion has turned into antimodernism, which occasionally has brought them to "join forces with neo-traditionalists."⁸ The nature of this peculiar, and significant, convergence, will be treated in the next chapter. Far more commonly, "for other postmodernists, being simply 'against' modernism was both impossible and beside the point." These have been the playful jugglers of antinomies, dichotomies, and oppositions, all of which, they sneer, should be abandoned and replaced with amorphous expressions that may be invested with a polyvalence of meaning—this is Foucauldian orthodoxy carried into the literary criticism of social science: a pit of maddening pointlessness, which "is often infuriating to modernists and other critics" since the Foucauldian jokers "seem to avoid the kind of battle that their critics desire."⁹

Hence, postmodernism as non-modernism often appears as avoidance behavior, a retreat into non-confrontational stances distinguished by an emphasis on play, the relativity of perspectives, self-absorption, and the inconsequence of theory, interest, value, and meaning.¹⁰

"Use the project as a 'mocking varlet,'" Bataille had said. Send it ahead to confuse the waters, to buy time with the visitors, using glib, cries and affected scruples—until the experience can make its sovereign appearance.

In this past quarter of a century, the postmodern output has reached vast dimensions. It has colonized and created a (structured) myriad of academic departments (from English to economics by way of history), journals, conferences,

and associations, and through these it has tangentially affected the technocratic environment—the ministerial bodies of education, as well as the field of public administration with the Foucauldian analysis of “governmentality.”¹¹ Despite its publicized pose of inebriating detachment, sardonic equanimity, and aesthetic “self-absorption,” the highly regimented movement of postmodernism is fanatical, intolerant (remember Foucault calling the Greeks “disgusting!”), ambitious, and acquisitive: it passes itself off as disaggregated and creatively unorganized, but that is far from being the case. Through their various practices and “discourses,” many such sects achieve the goals previously mentioned, which are congruent with the agenda of power: that is, fragment dissent, impeach debate, antagonize and censor opposing views, discredit universal compassion, promote U.S. corporate power though the promarketing discourse of diversity, and annihilate the comprehension of political dynamics through the ceaseless application of Foucault’s “theory” of power.

It is not the aim of this section to propose a survey of the already immense “scholarly” production of postmodernism. In this chapter, we should like to review a number of representative works conducted in this tradition, with a view to evidencing their (methodological) derivation from the Bataillean project by way of Foucaudian theory. This is done to stress that all such examples, precisely because they issue from such a special seed (or “core”), whether their respective authors are aware of it or not, are in fact (1) pervaded by an irresponsible worship of pessimistic inconsequence; (2) they are devoid of any scientific, interpretative value; and, as a result, (3) reveal themselves to be but instruments of a tendentious and divisive gospel. The sample is by no means exhaustive; it is here presented as a mere introduction to a forthcoming debate, which, hopefully, would reassess the postmodern record no longer in the light of its putative Foucauldian beginnings, but by making Bataille the point of departure.

The chosen illustrations have been grouped into two sections: the impact of postmodernism on education and political correctness in American discourse, and a discussion of the Foucauldian synthesis, *Empire*, by Hardt and Negri.

Political Correctness and Education

American postmodernism is generally denoted by relativist agitprop (“there is no truth!”), pretentious hellenizing neologisms (e.g., heteroglossic, heterology, paralogy, etc.), an orgy of “plurified” mass nouns (discursivities, knowledges, pedagogies, literacies . . .), and a libidinous indulgence in split infinitives, in which “critically” is the adverb of choice (as in “to critically evaluate”).

The cultural studies exponents, in general, offer fractured English, jargon and sentences that could bring tears to the eyes of a tenth-grade English teacher.¹²

The special terminology of postmodernism was encoded by Jean-François Lyotard, an associate of Foucault, as the standard with which we are all familiar. Lyotard’s influential treatise on postmodernism and education (*La condition*

(*postmoderne*) appeared in France in 1979, and was translated into English five years later. The relativism in Lyotard's thesis was its most superficial trait; the message and the intent—roughly the same as Bataille's and Foucault's—were more subtle.

In *The Postmodern Condition*, subtitled *A Report on Knowledge*, we learned that we should use the term "*modern*" to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse." A "metadiscourse" was a particular sublanguage that made "explicit appeal to some grand narrative" (*grand récit*).¹³ In other words, Western intellectual production could be construed as a collection of creative and self-contained word-games that have been crafted to animate a particular, plausible, and captivating *story*—say, the martyrdom of Jesus, the God-incarnate (the metadiscourse of Christian theology); or the advent of industrial capitalism as the trigger of proletarian rebellion (the metadiscourse of Marxism). The *postmodern*, by contrast, was simply defined as "incredulity toward metanarratives." So, postmodernism was that special metanarrative that teaches that there are no metadiscourses. It was the skeptic's renewed warning against the swallowing of tall tales, which are nothing but the ideas of screenplays written cyclically by generations of hacks, whom we call "thinkers," to mask concrete power relations. No one failed to notice, of course, that since postmodernism was itself a screenplay, it was no less liable to being a hoax than the others. A traditional impasse—which has been, so it seems, bypassed with a grand *boutade*: Why not regard postmodernism as a fraud to end all frauds, and leave it at that? And so it went.

For Lyotard, cases involving conflict between (at least) two parties "cannot be equally resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments," because "there is no neutral ground upon which to adjudicate between competing claims, no synthesizing master discourse that can reproduce the speculative unity of knowledge."¹⁴ With this reformulation we found ourselves on thinner ice than we did with Foucault, for now we could not even afford the privilege to *declare* whether something was "disgusting!" or not: we could still manifest that much through deeds, of course, but the threshold of hypocrisy set for the discursive game had been raised. "Dispersion," Lyotard soothed, was "good in itself."¹⁵

From the postmodern perspective, it followed that science is itself "a sort of discourse."¹⁶ Its mathematical proofs and its technological sophistication do not make it truer, or less mendacious, than the other grand narratives. "By reinforcing technology," Lyotard wrote, "we 'reinforce' reality, and therefore our chance of being right."¹⁷ This is undoubtedly true. The "reinforcement of technology" is a product of what has been recently heralded as "the end of science." This, too, is a fable, according to which our society has crossed an historical divide. It has allegedly stepped into a realm of knowledge that considers all major scientific questions resolved and fit to be finessed only by a patient work of mainframe computation. So-called Big Science *is* power, and it sees to it that its politics of massive investments, along with the phraseology that perpetuates its goals in academia and the ministries, does not change. "In this context, the existence of

a clearly defined—and above all, stable—scientific-technological ‘framework’, becomes a necessity for the political-military-industrial power triad, whose strategies require ever greater margins of certainty.”¹⁸ Biotech, for instance, is technique and discourse, but is it “right,” is it true? It is right and true for “Big Science’s” “regime of truth,” which consists of a “sort of scientific plebs, whose task is to execute projects and programs formulated by anonymous committees, ever more dominated by bureaucrats, by that new genus of research managers—[individuals] utterly bereft of the culture and sensitivity that characterize the true scientist.”¹⁹

But Lyotard did not have the time, nor the knowledge, to weigh the merits and demerits of official science; even a summary judgment for this case would have forced him to rely on absolutes, that is, justice and truth—which is a luxury postmodernists cannot afford. They are to be satisfied with half-truths, at best. Besides, Lyotard had to get down to postmodern business at once:

The scientist questions the validity of narrative statements and verifies that they are never subject to argumentation and proof. He classifies them as pertaining to another mentality: savage, primitive, under-developed, backwards [. . .]. This unequal positioning is an intrinsic effect of rules of each game. We know its symptoms. It is the whole history of cultural imperialism since the beginning of the West.²⁰

So we had the villain, always the same: the disciplinarian discourse of the West. Now for the rebels:

The *self* does not amount to much, but it isn’t isolated, it is caught in a fabric of relations more complex and mobile than ever. Be it young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, it is always situated on the nodes of communication networks, no matter how peripheral these may be. [. . .]. Situated on locations through which travel messages of diverse nature.²¹

Up to this point, the model remained Bataillean. And, had it stopped here, Lyotard’s report, like the original, could scarcely promise in Ronald Reagan’s America more than aesthetic escape and morose sentimentality—assuming that was what radicals demanded at the time. Many of these thought indeed that the open space of the metadiscourse that denied all metadiscourses could absolve them “of the blinding task of looking towards the heavens for some blazing sun of Truth”; they felt that it opened their “senses and [recalled their] responsibilities to the ‘colors and beauties and enigmas and reaches of significance’ in this life.”²² But this could not have been enough. What Lyotard contributed to this Foucauldian exercise was a prophetic IT (information technology) spin. He recast the problem in terms of so-called performativity.

In the [postmodern] context of deligitimation [of all current metadiscourses], universities and the institutions of higher learning are henceforth tasked to form competences, not ideals: they will form so many doctors, [. . .] so many engineers.

[. . .] The imparting of knowledges no longer appears as destined to form an elite capable of guiding the nation [. . .], it provides the system with players capable of fulfilling suitably their role at the pragmatic posts that are needed by the institutions. In this sense, the "democratic" university [. . .] of our day appears scarcely performative.²³

Therefore, knowledge should no longer be foisted "in blocks," as it is customarily done in the West through the reading assignments of the so-called Great Books, but should rather be displayed and dispensed "à la carte." From menus of itemized bits of information, languages, and language-games, students might selectively piece together the installments of the narrative that would best caption their "technical and ethical experience."²⁴ Keeping abreast of the technological shift and of the new computer mania, Lyotard gazed ahead and forecast that, so long as it was expressible in computer language, didactic information might best be entrusted to machines and data bases.²⁵

Data bases are the encyclopedia of tomorrow. [. . .] They are 'nature' for the postmodern man.²⁶

The "Professor" would disappear, driven to extinction by the postmodern erasure of metanarratives and the electronic repackaging of higher learning. The Professor had been the enforcer, the disciplinarian of imperial, racist metadiscourses—he would not be missed. Moreover, he could not claim to have a mind more capacious than the storage facilities of modern information networks, nor could he vaunt to possess greater competence than the interdisciplinary teams of experts that would be in charge of imagining "new games."²⁷ Then, gauged by the criterion of "performativity," the question posed by the student would no longer be, "Is it true?" but, "Of what use is it?"

In the context of the mercantilization of knowledge, this question signifies most often: is it saleable?²⁸

And so we ask: What would these machines pass on to the user? "Established knowledge," was Lyotard's answer.²⁹

"Established knowledge"? Established by whom?

This was remarkable. Or rather, this was what one was bound to obtain by crossing Power/Knowledge with IT—Foucault's power reticulation had simply become the computer network. Conveniently, the speculative plane had been rid of the hidebound rector, and the rector replaced by the interdisciplinary team of experts playing games. The postmoderns were suggesting that everyone not willing to adjust should leave the lecture hall to them (Lyotard and associates couldn't have been so careless as to recommend their own demise after all). Who would then teach the pupils the (essential) metadiscourse that there is no metadiscourse?

Who is to spread the message about deligitimation itself? Not any technocrat or computer program. It will have to be the professor, someone like Lyotard himself.

Since the collapse of the grand narratives is itself a grand narrative, there is a logical necessity for at least some grand narrative.³⁰

Naturally.

Thereafter, postmodern education in America could take the following pro-pedagogic turn: in the early years of formation, the devotees of Lyotard proposed to communicate “enough of what is *held* to be true by the society to which the children belong so that they can function as citizens of that society.” At the higher level, they suggested that “the role of education is not to pass on the truth, but to *edify*.³¹

“To edify”? The suggested pedagogy thus appeared to resolve itself into a preliminary rehashing of Liberal indoctrination, followed by “edification”—by which means, was not clearly explained. After storming the palace of higher learning, Lyotard was presumably envisaging an arrangement whereby the interdisciplinary clans and their chieftains would collude with the grant-generous IT industry (a partner for hardware, media, and distance learning) and the business schools (“is it saleable?”), which, most of all, live by the ethos of performativity, to divide the “endowments for education” among themselves. It is fascinating how this practical understanding of contemporary education could have since been classed among the representative analyses of the “Left.” Nothing could be more fully aligned with the Interests of our contemporary regimes than the indifferent strokes of this post-modern sketch, which portrays, in essence, a pedagogical disaster.

Established knowledge. So this meant that the bulk of what we “know,” which, however we look at it, is an unpalatable hodgepodge of “grand narratives,” would by no means disappear, and that it could be laid out in clean synopses and copied onto computer memory. This was no resolution. Postmodernism merely recommended that the debate be truncated at a point where most fundamental questions about the nature of our social realities still remained unanswered. We should thus be satisfied with piling trivia in our heads, and call it quits. *This was the “end of education”*: compact and standardized accounts (who writes?) of, say, Shiism, Marxism, and the Spanish Civil War would be a click away from the pupils (“downloadable from the net,” as we say today), and the remainder of one’s training would be taken care of in the campuses of trade, technical, and vocational schools—the infamous “colleges.”

Education—like art, science, and perhaps political history as well—may have reached its historical fulfillment. [. . .] We have reached the end. [. . .] It is the beginning of the post-millennium blues.³²

Masters of the house, what would these postmodern practitioners of interdisciplinarity presently busy themselves with? They would focus on the “undecidables,” chaos, catastrophe, paradox, and the like. “Postmodern science,” said Lyotard, would not “produce the known, but the unknown.” Bataillean blather, once again. To wit:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the

consensus of a good taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.³³

While their business partners would obsess with performativity, the Foucauldians would look for "difference." Not the "grand narrative," but the short one (*le petit récit*) should occupy the daily research activities of the new academy. Of course, one should not have apprehended this division of labor as taking place in a setting that would be stable and pacific. No. Remember, the "postmodern condition" was a variation on the Foucauldian theme. Power is a given, and we are nested into it; we cannot wish for more than opposing resistance to it. Lyotard stated it explicitly: no "pure" alternative to the system is conceivable. It was understood—though the tenor of Lyotard's prognosis on this count was rather tame—that the "informatization of societies" would inevitably lead to "terror," that is, to an environment in which alternative views would be systematically eliminated. A giant filing bank of its constituents' personal data is indeed "the dream instrument" of the disciplinarian society. How is one, then, to fend off the system's inherent propensity ever to extend its monitoring, controlling reach? Precisely by cultivating difference. For Lyotard, the last thing the arts and sciences should be striving for is "consensus";³⁴ the rule of consensus is that proper of an authoritarian regime. But if one were to reduce all explorations to individual cases requiring but a "local" consensus, then the obscurantist conceit of wanting one truth for all instances would be seriously antagonized.³⁵ All narratives would become prime narratives, each being putatively irreducible to a number of universal truths.

To compile a digital anthology of incommensurable fables: this was Lyotard's quest for so-called paralogy. In the end, he hoped that computers, although they were potentially dangerous devices, could be tapped by "discussion groups" with a view to organizing knowledge and their culture of resistance. He concluded with a typical flourish of postmodern balderdash: "We see in the offing a politics that will grant equal respect to the desire of justice and to that of the unknown."³⁶

Granted, the advent of the Internet confirmed Lyotard's observations and refreshed his text. But what of these observations? Were they really novel, and most importantly, were they in any sense dissenting? Neither. On one side, they were old truisms masquerading as iconoclast pronouncements, and, on the other, meretricious rhetoric, straining to mesh into the conservative mainstream. One need only leaf the pages of Thorstein Veblen's superb *The Higher Learning in America*, which was written at the end of World War I, to see through this particular postmodern deceit. Veblen had already intuited how a persistent habituation to the "pecuniary conduct of affairs," coupled with the "mechanical stress" of the "industrial arts," had constrained, if not entirely disfigured, the traditional countenance of the pursuit of knowledge, which is in the nature of an "idle curiosity." "Business shrewdness," Veblen wrote, is "incompatible with the spirit of higher learning."³⁷ Even all that postmodern clamor about the end of

metadiscourses, is a development that, following Veblen, could have been construed intelligently as an instance of spiritual shift:

These canons of reality, or of verity, have varied from time to time, have in fact varied incontinently with the passage of time and the mutations of experience.³⁸

The drive to make money, as Veblen witnessed a century ago, has “submerged” the institution of the university in a variety of enterprises connected with the realm of business, which have destroyed the free environment of research. In its stead have emerged “quasi-universities installed by men of affairs, of a crass ‘practicality.’” These are the contemporary academic conglomerates that sell collegiate catechism dispensed through mass-assembled electives, “training of secondary school teachers,” “*edification* of the unlearned by ‘university extension,’” and “erudition by mail-order”—structures capped by the cupola of the “academic executive” and the shareholders of the “governing boards” (the wealthy Regents).³⁹

The university is conceived as a business house dealing in *merchantable* knowledge, placed under the governing hand of a captain of erudition, whose office is to turn the means in hand to account in the largest feasible output.⁴⁰

The struggle among schools for enrollment, publicity, and profit is conducted by each academic conglomerate’s “centralized administrative machinery,” which “is on the whole detrimental to scholarship, even in the undergraduate work.”

Such a system of authoritative control, standardization, gradation, accountancy, classification, credits and penalties, will necessarily be drawn on stricter lines the more the school takes on the character of a house of correction or penal settlement; in which the irresponsible inmates are to be held to a round of distasteful tasks and restrained from (conventionally) excessive irregularities of conduct.⁴¹

This concerted and competitive effort at disciplining the masses is the ferocious routine of the academic personnel leading “bureaus of erudition—commonly called departments,” whose politics is shaded by “a clamorous conformity” and a “truculent quietism,” both stances passing as a “mark of scientific maturity.” These specialists exhibit an “histrionic sensibility,” a jesting touch that blends nicely with the “jealous” attention that they otherwise reserve to the “views and prepossessions prevalent among the respectable, *conservative* middle-class.”⁴² The inquiries of such “experts” are not “likely to traverse old-settled convictions in the social, economic, political or religious domain, for “it is bad business policy to create unnecessary annoyance.”⁴³ All of which institutional disasters conspire, under a “regime of graduated sterility,” to consummate the “skillfully devised death of the spirit.”⁴⁴

Even within a memoir such as Veblen’s, drafted long ago, could a late creation like postmodernism be reduced to a special case of a general and sinister phenomenon. Exposed as but a tardy variant of the loyal bureaucratic gatekeepers,

the Foucauldians should acknowledge how little they are entitled to sport those airs of dissident self-importance, which are their histrionic trademark. In point of fact, not only had Lyotard failed to display any originality, but by inscribing postmodernism in the modern-day utilitarian church, he betrayed the movement's conservative intent.

Speaking of the "penal settlement" and the horrors of "standardization," a question arises (which will be dealt with at length in chapter 9): if the Left had been so impatient to denounce in our time the iniquitous machinations of Finance's tyrannical discipline, why did it not look close to home and paint Veblen's effigy on its banners, instead of importing Foucault? The Norwegian-American had touched on the same problems and spoken of them truthfully, with his unsurpassable class. Veblen had advocated the literal dismantlement of our system, by disabling it at its *central nodes*, by abolishing, that is, some of its leading institutions. Above all, he had craved a change in mentality. Veblen meant revolution. Foucault and company, on the other hand, with their cherry tree tales of decentered power, which falsify the premises of all social analysis, were merely content to play the role of the *enfants terribles*—content to be allotted by the disciplinarian father a corner of the sandbox where they could pose as "radicals."

And so by the mid-eighties, when America began printing new editions even of Bataille,⁴⁵ the postmoderns set out to "deconstruct." They struck their hammers to the beat of "break and rupture of structure": they disassembled the arguments of the "classics" with a view to isolating the ideological pigment, whose grain could unfailingly be shown to be patriarchal, racist, and disciplinarian. The color of power, in brief. The obverse of this opus of critical demolition was Foucault's "genealogical" imperative: to denounce the sexism and bias of the West's elitist martinets amounted to celebrating "otherness," "difference," and the "little narrative." A marketing shift was in the air: the academic machine was about to roll out bales of clannish chronicles of localized, exclusivist victimization. Soon enough, each "group," each "knowledge"—alternatively defined by race, gender, class, or creed—that had been historically abused by the dominant classes of the West, was going to enter into a grotesque contest to win, as it were, the award for most subjugated tribe.

The pedagogy of deconstruction is disquieting; it almost seems aimless. It engages and develops most refined competencies of critical thinking not to allow anybody to make any meaningful use of them, apart from interrogating subsequent temptations to say 'I know.' [. . .] [It is imperative that the students] do not replace old canons with a 'new truth'. 'Deconstructive teaching' [. . .] is usable with certain socialist, libertarian, anarchic ideals. That this pedagogy could serve 'right' and 'left' political ideologies is, one would suppose, incriminating. Such heterogeneity or undecidability, however, is the hallmark of deconstructive production.⁴⁶

To deconstruct in this fashion was to open a can of worms, which Foucault, as we saw, had already spilled, when, late in his career, he had to make amends, confusedly, for the excesses of his Bataillean penchant. What was the danger?

Clearly, fans of bestiality or neo-Nazism would both qualify as “disqualified knowledges,” but it is understood that the (white Anglo-Saxon) gamekeepers of the postmodern sweepstakes would in no case allow these two groups to compete. The Foucauldian discourse must be applied selectively, or else it does not work.

Deconstruction, which is not a political critique, therefore has political significance.⁴⁷

And in politics there are rules, especially if they are established always by the same Interests, which in our story have actively encouraged this so-called politics of diversity since the promotion of Foucault in the late seventies. In order to prevent genuine democratic alliances from functioning, what more sensible path is there than to attempt to set at variance those that are also born to understand one another—that is, humanity at large?

Culture becomes whatever any group or researcher wants it to mean. [. . .] Hundreds of essays on ‘cultural identity’ fling out references to [. . .] Foucault with little purchase on their topic. Endless discussions of multiculturalism proceed from the unsubstantiated assumption that numerous distinct ‘cultures’ constitute American society.⁴⁸

In the postmodern tradition, the overture to this massive exercise in the art of scission, customarily features a barmy paper-crusade against “the whole metaphysical, Eurocentric tradition, of the ‘white mythology.’”⁴⁹ In the postmodern book of prayer, “Eurocentric,” “white,” and “metaphysical” are the customary attributes of the Devil. Exasperated by the all-Western dominance of the school curricula, multiculturalists bewail the white’s conviction that the arts and sciences are for the most part an occidental affair:

Who are the great composers? Bach, Beethoven, [. . .] Cage. Who are the great philosophers? Socrates, Plato, [. . .] Foucault. [. . .] It is obvious isn’t it? It is White people—mostly White men, actually. [. . .] But surely [the] achievements [by non-European ‘others’] do not compare with those of Michelangelo, Socrates, Beethoven or Shakespeare? [. . .] [The ruling institutions] privilege White, middle-class and male interests.⁵⁰

Problematic situation in many ways. For one, Anglo-Saxon postmodernists most often display a remarkably clumsy grasp of the European soul: that one could in these textbooks draw a continuous line from Plato to Foucault, or even more absurdly, from Bach to Cage (!), is disquieting enough. But what is worse, for them, is that the founding fathers of their creed are indeed all *homines gallici*—French males steeped in Western metaphysics as white, privileged, and Eurocentric as could possibly be. But no matter. It was high time to unleash the “subjugated cultures” and fire broadsides of venom against the abominable “elite white male.”⁵¹ As if only *he*, grumble the postmoderns, thinks he can possess, manufacture, and distribute truth, or knowledge. Very well, the news then is that

we may proceed to mince the spectrum of discourse into an innumerable set of epistemologies including, say, a "feminist epistemology," or even more pointedly, a "black feminist epistemology"—something as far removed from and, as Foucault had suggested, as "harshly opposed," to white male business as discursively possible. This would thus permit one to contend that women, or especially nonwhite women, acquire knowledge in ways genetically and spiritually different, if not diametrically antagonistic to those proper of Eurocentric males. And the whole "theory" may unravel through an exhibit of snapshots showing how the two creatures (the Eurocentric male and the nonwhite female) are aggressively alien to one another. Then, once this race is under way, one could very well end up devising an epistemology for every single human living upon earth—aren't we all "different" from one another after all?

Although it is tempting to claim the Black women are more oppressed than everyone else and therefore have the best standpoint from which to understand the mechanisms, and effects of oppression, this is not the case. Instead, those ideas that are validated as true by African-American women, African-American men, Latina lesbians, Asian-American women, Puerto Rican men, and other groups with distinctive standpoint, become the most 'objective' truths. Each group speaks from its own standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge. But because each group perceives its own truth as partial, its knowledge is unfinished.⁵²

This is a prime example of postmodern discursivity. Aside from wondering whatever happened to the Latino gays, the Puerto Rican women, and the rest of the human population, one cannot but be struck by this presumption that certain racially and sexually defined groups, precisely because of the wrongs they have suffered at the hands of the whites, should be afforded a higher, clearer vista on truth, and on the depth of suffering and oppression ("more 'objective' truths"). As if given clans could be accorded by a self-appointed tribunal of "counterauthority" a proprietary right to the blues. Clearly, a favorable reading of this excerpt would suggest that these particular groups of subjugated people are those that still need strong support in their struggle for social acceptance, a proud identity, and a peaceful life in white America. One may read in it a special motion of empathy toward some, rather than an acrimonious exclusion of others. But this would be granting this argument a favor it does not deserve. No question: the white male is to date the most abominable, arrogant, obscene, murderous, mendacious, and savage creature that has tread upon this earth—his record of ignominies, which grows by the day, is simply indescribable and matched by no other. Feminists are telling us nothing new; what they forget, however—and this is an unforgivable omission—is that the greatest amount of violence that the white male has expended, he has expended upon white males like himself. He oppresses ferociously, discriminates, and insults daily all those individuals mentioned in the above quote, but he violates and crushes with even greater determination, brutality, and profusion his own brothers. And this is a fact that the modern historical and social experience reveals unambiguously.

Now, what about the rest of our race? Yes, feminist rhetoric is mostly governed by logistical exigencies: feminists make noise and perforce restrict the focus of their grievances to attract the public's attention to the plight of their sisters around the world. The cause is noble. But to affirm that only *they* qua women, or nonwhite individuals (i.e., weak targets), *know* or know more about suffering, is capricious bombast. It simply isn't true: there could be many white men that could share, and *have shared*, what they have suffered at the hands of their fellow beings in ways no less profound and insightful than those recounted by non-white women—in ways, truly, that are by and large *identical*. Maybe postmodernists should take a look at the literature; not *their* cliquish "literacies," but the patrimony of cultures to realize their myopia. To realize further that all such insistence on this form of reverse discrimination, as we all know, brings no end to the tension. By making cultural difference a "differing science" and an "antagonistic discourse," it entrenches clans and factions along racial and/or sexual divides, fossilizing acrimony and fueling absurd tribal warfare among individuals that could easily be allies.

Let the fight be one, a fight which *does* acknowledge cultural and gender differences, but which is ultimately waged in the name of a common cause to alleviate suffering and to oppose the grave injustices wrought by the incumbent system of privilege.

But the postmodern deacons of multiculturalism will not listen. We suppose that it might be titillating to arraign from the pulpits of male-driven academe the crimes of white elite males in the name of their "minority" victims. The classroom shows gains in intensity when white (postmodern) males themselves take the stand to perform this routine. Quintessential self-criticism, so it seems. Yet the fact that it is the Vested Interests of the schools' governing boards that mandate the booking of such postmodern slapstick should give one pause to look upon the act with a tinge of suspicion. The bitter carnival continues nonetheless. Everything is open to recrimination or dispute, from Jesus to the sunset of the Aztecs. The Christians worship a Hebrew God in the shape of a human, whom the Jews do not acknowledge. Jesus was a Jew. No, the Nazis said he wasn't⁵³ (but the Nazis do not count). Truly, he was black, swore an Afrocentrist scholar.⁵⁴ The Foucaldians beat them all with an icon of their own:

All artistic symbols lose power in time. If I were to fictionalize a resurrected Christ among us today, I would depict him as a black homeless man with a mild retardation, who—yes—is gay. For my understanding of Jesus is that, if he would return, he would be living on the *margins* of society, since his divine plan is to overturn the world establishment both ideologically and materially.⁵⁵

Consider, moreover, the Catholic suppression of the Aztecs cult—case in point. One will hardly find nowadays a student, or a professor, who will be able to appraise the matter dispassionately. The annihilation of the pre-Columbian civilizations is one of the fortés of postmodernism's accusatory repertoire. In the postmodern view, there is no worse feat of genocidal hypocrisy perpetrated by a

traditional, hierarchical establishment than this extermination of the South American natives by the Catholic Spaniards. The conquistadores literally butchered those worlds out of existence—there is no arguing about it. But the issue, as known, is a difficult one, for, even if we, as Westerners, should always condemn such atrocities, we are nonetheless confronted with the mass sacrifices practiced by the victims of the Spanish blood bath. What about *that* sort of carnage? What was one to do with it? This is a question that (well-bred, middle-class, comfortably living) postmodernists do their best to dodge. For, if they cannot, it might lead some of them (not few), for the sake of preserving—in words—their Bataillean integrity, to uphold a position that is, in fact, delirious. The following blurb taken from a monograph on Bataille, which was published by a world-renowned academic press, is far less uncommon in postmodern circles than what one might think:

[The principle of massacre] was established by the example of the Conquistadores, who massacred their way across America with a cruelty and violence and in such abundance *that it puts Aztec sacrifice to shame . . .* The Aztecs did not go in search of riches to subjugate native populations to themselves but sought the wealth (that is sacrificial victims) that could be expended in excessive violence. [. . .] In this sense Aztec sacrifice does retain its *sacred quality* and remains at the antipodes of production. It stands against the spirit of conquest embodied by Spain. *In all probability sacrifice never involved cruelty and degradation; on the contrary the sacrificial victim was an honored guest.* Even in the extreme form that Aztec society gave to it, sacrifice retains its element of communication. [. . .] Aztec society was in fact extremely well-ordered and *puritan* and the human sacrifice conformed to the general sense of order.⁵⁶

"Puritan"?

We shouldn't overdramatize the discussion but limit ourselves to taking these buffooneries for what they are. These vexatious pranks aim at pricking the flab of conventional moral sentiment (so loose and lax by now that it has become quite numb to the prick). More importantly, they work to instigate and fuel prejudice in the minds of students against the *professed* values of traditional monotheism (tolerance, compassion, and conservation of life) by attacking the religious institutions which have hitherto, for the most part, *disastrously* embodied those very aspirations. The dismal corruption of Judeo-Christianity as a bastion of devout observances has made the subversive job of Bataille, the Foucauldians, and their followers veritably an easy one.

Very well. To be fair, however, one would imagine that since certain segments of the Anglo-Saxon academia, de facto condone, via postmodernism, the social heritage of the Aztecs, calling it "puritan" and "ordered," Nazism, then, should be tolerated as well. It was ordered, and, in a certain sense, "puritan"; it practiced the holocaust in a methodical and orderly fashion, and, as mentioned earlier, was wholly steeped into chthonic forms of sacred belief. In short, Nazism was but a modern, Teutonic resurrection of the ancient warrior cult of the Aztecs. There are undeniable similarities—martial, social, and religious. Agreed?

No, not in the least.

We must not forget that postmodernists are conservatives of the Liberal order. And the defeat of Hitlerism is the most important myth of militant Liberalism. Yet Holocaust historians have occasionally used harsh words against postmodernism for mocking the virtues of “objectivity.” They fear that deconstructive wordplay would delegitimize the denunciatory findings of their archival work (as yet another—pro-Semitic?—discourse), and thereby deny them in the long run the subtle political advantages of their current position. Which are the ear of power, the not insignificant proceeds of the Holocaust industry, and a stake in the steady labor of surveillance directed at the Germans, whom the Anglo-Saxons still look upon with suspicion. Doubtless, the history of the Holocaust is an important and necessary endeavor. But wouldn’t the public benefit if part of that remarkable intellectual investment were rather devoted to *accounting for the rise of the Hitlerites*, which is still a nebulous topic? In any case, the postmoderns have rushed to apologize, downplaying the spat as a mere misunderstanding. Asked to choose between the “established” methodology of the Holocaust historians and the harangue of the late Holocaust deniers, the Foucauldians find it rather unproblematic to break their oath “of incredulity,” and side, of course, with the former. “Holocaust denial,” they say, “is not history.”⁵⁷ Most assuredly it is not, but this conclusion is not at all warranted by their postmodern “vision.” In their terms, to pass judgment on anything, they will have to act and think like the rest of us, seeking justice and acting upon it. For everyone knows that postmodernists rely precisely on the canons of thought that derive from the traditions they are so keen to denigrate.⁵⁸ But they cannot admit to doing so: that would be violating the letter of their “postmodern non-knowledge.” Postmodernism is therefore an imposture. On the one hand, by taking constant exception to its own rule, it corroborates what passes as “good in the way of belief,”⁵⁹ and on the other it weakens opposition by fomenting divisiveness. As a sign of their commitment to the current political orthodoxy, the postmoderns sentence:

We have a duty to remember the victims of the Nazis, especially those murdered in the Final Solution.⁶⁰

Why “especially” these last? What about the millions of innocent others (*including* German civilians)? What perverse inclination could give form to a system of weight and tale applicable to the defenseless victims of violence? Are we not all worth the same? Isn’t justice one and the same for all?

So, no, postmodernism will not allow to compare the Third Reich to the Aztec Empire (1) because the former was vanquished by the Anglo-Americans, which is a “good” thing, whereas the latter was destroyed by the Latin Catholics, who instead are patriarchal and sexist (i.e. “bad”); (2) because the Aztec society was according to Bataille “balanced” and possessed of an appealing carnality, which he thought lacked entirely in Nazi Germany; and (3) because Nazism was no “sovereign” formation but a freak of the bourgeoisie, a disciplinarian society, so said Foucault, run by “the most sinister, boring, and disgusting petit-bourgeois

imaginable.”⁶¹ So the sanguinary natives of Central America may go scot-free (and blessed), whereas the blood-simple, white, Eurocentric Germans and Spaniards are indiscriminately packed together to be forever reviled.

Fair enough.

The postmodern routine operates according to a simple pattern: one has to side with the customary targets of disciplinarian authoritarianism and construct on their behalf a “discourse,” which must then be employed as the antagonistic viewpoint for a war of accretion to be waged within the closed spaces of social interaction (at work, at school, in public spaces, conversing, etc.). Hence, the “disqualified truths” of homosexuals, women, minorities, Aztecs, colonized and uncolonized natives, intoxicants, and Aphrodisitic cults (Nazis excluded) come to constitute the new jungle of the “dangerous” in which the postmodernist lives, and from which he or she conducts daily sallies against the hated white Eurocentric cad. So, for instance, reggae music is good: it is the genuine and *popular*⁶² expression of disqualified minorities in a white, postcolonial administration—which is bad. But what if Jamaica happens to market “a new batch of reggae singers who sing some songs whose lyrics feature violent attacks on gay people”? Songs that encourage the listeners to “go out and shoot, stab, club, stone and burn lesbian and gay people?”⁶³ This reality—one in a myriad of similar instances—is an embarrassment to postmodernism; it throws a wrench into the Foucauldian works. An embarrassment to the “high-minded democrat” perhaps, but certainly not to the master Foucault, or least of all to Bataille. These would have been utterly indifferent to this passing effusion of blood, shed in the back alleys of power’s subperipheral networks: wouldn’t both have shrugged it off as the bloody, changeless law of heterogeneity? *C'est la vie.*

Empire

Sooner or later someone had to apply Foucault’s neo-Gnostic fiction of power on a world scale. It happened recently, as yet another tribute to “globalization,” in a book entitled *Empire*. The Foucauldian contractors responsible for this ambitious remodeling are Michael Hardt and Antonio (“Toni”) Negri, respectively an American professor of literature and an Italian political scientist, whose joint opus, released in 2000, “has received an astonishing degree of mainstream, as well as radical attention.”⁶⁴ Decidedly, the Foucauldians have shown themselves to the elites as an inexhaustible source of delightful surprises. Not contented with having diffused the story about power circulating at the domestic margins, presently the mocking varlets have decided to deploy the network all over the planet.

Hardt and Negri are a curious pair. According to the leftists, the latter “has unimpeachable revolutionary credentials.”⁶⁵ In the seventies he had been one of the leading theorists of Italy’s so-called extraparliamentarian Left; his had been one of the voices of Italy’s *gauchiste* groundswell until the leaden season of Right- and Left-wing terrorism and the economic downswing brought the Italian Communists to close ranks with the oligarchic coalitions of the

U.S.-backed Christian Democrats. The Italian Left had failed. Hardliners such as Negri, however, raised the ante and advocated from the recalcitrant fringes of the labor movement resistance à outrance: *violence* was the answer—uncompromising “proletarian violence.” “Violence,” Negri wrote, does not “provide the solution but it is fundamental.”⁶⁶ But in 1978, in what would become one of the most mysterious and critical transitions in the nebulous game of the Cold War,⁶⁷ the Red Brigades kidnapped and killed Aldo Moro, a leader of Christian Democracy bent on forging an unprecedented entente with Italy’s Communists. The Italian authorities, profiting from the clime of public psychosis, proceeded to suppress the extraparliamentarian Left. “Thousands of activists were arrested on political charges. Negri was sentenced to prison, only to be released as a Radical MP. Escaping to France, where he had the support [of the Foucauldian clan], he continued his academic career in Paris until 1997 when he voluntarily returned to Italy in 1997 to serve the remainder of his sentence.”⁶⁸ Hardt was one of Negri’s students during the Parisian exile; he went on to become an tenured academic at Duke University, which is presently one of postmodernism’s redoubts.

In Paris, Negri “[rewrote] Marx as Foucault.” It wasn’t much of a stretch for him to do so, as he had reached a similar path by raising *labor*, instead of power, to “a kind of absolute subject.”⁶⁹ So, in schematic terms, Negri’s minor contribution to the postmodern project overlapped Foucault’s template: on the one hand, Negri posited Labor + Violence (=Bataille’s heterogeneity of the Slave), as the joint expression of *potenza* (power); and he equated Capital with the State (or “metapower,” in the wording of Foucault), on the other: in short, a Marxian carbon copy of Power/Knowledge.

To the great relief of the U.S. administration, whose propagandists had lately been fiddling awkwardly with a semantic synthesis of their country’s *Liberal* devotion and its troubled *imperial* vigor (Are we a Republic or an Empire?⁷⁰), Hardt and Negri proclaim that “imperialism is over.” The fateful transition of imperialism to *Empire* seems to have occurred, the authors aver, around 1968—at the time of the Tet Offensive during the Vietnam War.⁷¹ By then, the old-fashioned manner of subjugating nations and their peoples, so we read, changed dramatically, and a new configuration of power relations emerged.

In contrast to imperialism, Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a *decentered* and *deterritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers.⁷²

Familiar?

Imperialism according to the authors was colonial, centralizing, bourgeois, nationalistic . . . In sum, imperialism was modern. Imperialism, we guessed it, was also European. Modern and European, which, in postmodern terms, is to say despotic and obsolete.

Hiroshima, Sabra and Shatila, Vietnam, Cambodia, Verdun, etc.; that was yesterday and the dirty work of the nation-state. And if globalization erases that, 'good riddance!'⁷³

But *Empire*, instead, Empire is postmodern, and "postmodernity," the authors finalized, "is American." American? The tone is ambiguous: What are we to deduce from this, that imperialism was pernicious, but that America's postmodern *Empire*, because it allegedly rid the world of imperialism, is wholesome, or . . . ? Well, yes, American patriots should be pleased to hear that "*The United States does not [. . .] form the center of an imperialistic project.*" Indeed, Hardt and Negri are convinced that "no nation will be the world leader in the way modern European nations were."⁷⁴ They are confident that we all now live in a regime "outside of history, or at the end of history."⁷⁵ End of science, end of education, end of history. . . . The authors have just driven us past another signpost of conservatism: if something is finished, why bother fixing it? And *oppression*, that old staple of dissenting oratory, how did it fare? Does (American) Empire oppress? Certainly, respond the authors, "but that fact should not make us nostalgic in any way for the old forms of domination. The passage to Empire and its process of globalization," they wink, "offer new possibilities to the force of liberation." "Our task is not simply to resist [the processes of globalization] but to reorganize them and redirect them towards new ends." In brief, the name of the new game is to "construct counter-Empire."⁷⁶

So what we are about to discover is a Bataillean tale combining Foucault's fantastic sets with Marxian dialectics: the fluid and elusive villain will be played by "power" appearing for the first time on the screen as a *global* entity (i.e., "Empire"), while the romantic downtrodden masses—or rather, "the diverse legions" of "*Multitude*" to use the authors' expressions—will be seen waging an underground struggle against a mechanized, capitalist State. Of special importance is the vital reliance of this faceless, decentered and computerized power on the energy of the core—represented by lifeblood of the Multitude as a whole—which the machines need to vampirize in order to function. The main tension of this drama revolves around the rebels' plan to sabotage the machines, repossess the energy of the core, and "redirect" it to create "counter-Empire." This is the summary of the plot, and it isn't particularly promising, for we have seen it all before: not only in Bataille and Foucault, of course, but recently in the movie *The Matrix*. We can only hope for some decent action and stunning special effects. Let us watch.

The sovereignty of Empire is realized at the margins, where borders are flexible and identities are hybrid and fluid. It would be difficult to say which is more important to Empire, the centers or the margins. [. . .] We could even say that the process itself is virtual and that its power resides in the power of the virtual.⁷⁷

The primal energy of the core, presently poured all over the surface of the world, and undulating like a snake,⁷⁸ is captured and trapped by *Empire*.

The captive fluid circulates and is being conserved along the pipes, ports, and channels of Empire, which is the given, all-encompassing network of social interaction. Empire is everywhere—bureaucratic-military authorities are but the manipulative usurpers of Empire; they do not truly own Empire but feed parasitically on the fuel (the life-giving lymph of the people) that makes the whole illusory realm possible. The ongoing Marxian suspense is meant to keep us riveted: the postmodern underground of flesh and bones engages the authorities in a tug-of-war whose pulls and counterpulls of increasing violence should lead—so the rebels hope—to a paroxysm of brutality such that a tidal surge of revolutionary vengeance would overwhelm the oppressor once and for all. When the Day of Reckoning should come nobody knows—the question is to be set aside as a messianic conundrum. In the meantime, there is struggle, blow, and counterblow, indefinitely.

When the action of Empire is effective, this is due not to its own force but to the fact that it is driven by the *rebound* from the resistance of the multitude against imperial power. One might say in this sense that resistance is actually prior to power. When imperial government intervenes, it selects the liberatory impulses of the multitude in order to destroy them, and in return is driven forward by resistance. [. . .] Empire in itself is not a positive reality. In the very moment it rises up, it falls. Each imperial act is a *rebound* of the resistance of the multitude that poses a new obstacle of the multitude to overcome. [. . .] Imperial power is the negative residue, the fallback of the operation of the multitude; it is a parasite that draws its vitality from the multitude's capacity to create ever new sources of energy and value.⁷⁹

It is interesting to note how this Foucauldian description of the interaction between modern power and the sacred core ends up re-evoking, inevitably, the dynamics of power/laughter imagined by Bataille almost word for word.⁸⁰ We recognize the hand of the master positing the energy of the core (“resistance”) “prior to” discourse (“Empire”). We recognize Bataille’s metaphorical style in the ebbs and flows that culminate into the nothingness of the headless mannequin; in the “parasitical” encroachment of reason upon the heterogeneous forces; and even in the very choice of words, such as “rebound” (*rejaillissement*): the point of discontinuity that affords power its violent manifestations throughout the grid of the disciplinarian discourse. . . . Postmodernism “at its best” is but one endless chanting of Bataille’s mantras. Here, however, the interplay of reaction and counterreaction is even more contrived. Hardt and Negri suggest that power sucks the energy out of the Multitude not merely by regulating it, but by “whispering”⁸¹ to it *patterns of resistance*. The conspiracy, in other words, runs both ways: Empire, too, wishes to instigate among the Many a constant desire to rebel so that, by raising the temperature, it may rhythmically harness its hardware to the power surges unleashed by the rabble’s sedition. The villain, revealingly, is said to be but an illusion, “a negative residue”: it is Maya, a nasty trick of the light, a poltergeist’s nightmare, whose sinister powers of suggestion must be kept at bay before they may be dispelled altogether.

In *Multitude*, their 2004 sequel to their blockbuster *Empire*, Hardt and Negri wrote that “it takes a network to fight a network.”⁸² They believe, therefore, it is time to give up all the talk of regional autonomy and cultural uniqueness. “Aware that in affirming this thesis [they] are swimming against the [Left postmodern] tide,”⁸³ Hardt and Negri insist, in keeping with their vision of salvation, that we need Empire as much as we need globalization to organize counter-Empire. All late revolts around the world, from Tiananmen Square to Chiapas, they claim, have shown that all such motions have dissolved in a Babel of unrequited communication. Each uprising was unto itself singular and unique, and thus incapable of clasping on to the others, which were individually and severally articulated in mutually incompatible idioms. But along the common highway of globalization, the diverse clans may learn to drive at a common speed—the speed that will pace their forthcoming revolution. So, *in the meantime*, globalization it is.

The world market establishes a real politics of difference. [...] Marketing has perhaps the clearest relation to post-modernist theories, and one could say that the capitalist marketing strategies have been post-modernist *avant la lettre*. [...] Ever more hybrid and differentiated populations present a proliferating number of “target markets” that can each be addressed by specific marketing strategies—one for gay Latino males between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two, another for Chinese-American teenage girls, and so forth. Postmodern marketing recognizes [that] . . . every difference is an opportunity. [...] People of all different races and sexes, and sexual orientations should potentially be included in the corporation; the daily routine of the workplace should be rejuvenated with unexpected changes and an atmosphere of fun.⁸⁴

“An atmosphere of fun” in the corporation?

There is something unreal about this passage; it is hard to say whether it is its insincerity, its meretricious plaudit of “postmodern marketing” (especially from the pen of an erstwhile Marxist intransigent), its cloying conformism, its pandering multiculturalist affectation, or all of these things together. We’re being sold a “postmodern theory of revolution”,⁸⁵ but where is the “theory,” and where the “revolution”? Perhaps, most absurd and indecorous of all is the above celebration of the mercantile exploitation of “otherness,” of Western business’s alleged attention to and respect for other cultures, when it is known that peddling “the ethnic” is but the latest trick of corporate salesmanship. Indecorous because the practice is obviously not the fruit of a bold cosmopolitan excursion, but rather the mere boxing of foreign materials and artifacts, standardized and overpriced by Interests that do not know, and do not wish to know a thing of the countries and “cultures” from which they have bought (for nothing). But we are glad to think that we buy and sell “in the name of plurality and multiculturalism.”⁸⁶

One does not see an Indian Michael Jackson, a Chinese Madonna, a Malaysian Arnold Schwarzenegger [...], [or] an indigenous business woman from Brazil [going] to a famous [Western] manufacturer of skin care products [to inquire] about the secrets of their preparation. [...] Postmodernism is not only [...] a

western opportunity, it is the privilege of a particular group within western society. [. . .] For despite its claims to be pluralistic, postmodernism is ravenously monolithic. [. . .] Its language, logic, analytical grammar are intrinsically Eurocentric and shamelessly cannibalistic of Others.⁸⁷

Regardless, in the end, Hardt's and Negri's scrupulous concern for the fashion styles of homosexuals should suffice to dispel any misgivings one could have begun to harbor as to their "unimpeachable revolutionary credentials."

Struggle. The readers should not lose their patience just yet, as they are to approach the part in which the Multitude rebels. Let us listen: "Every struggle must attack at the heart of Empire." "This fact, however, does not give priority to any geographical regions, as if social movements in Washington, Geneva and Tokyo could attack the heart of Empire." "The only strategy available to the struggles is that of a constituent counterpower that emerges from within Empire."⁸⁸ So be it: the ministries and banks of the G-8 are to be considered irrelevant; again, the *center* is of no consequence. The thesis, we see it, is a fatigued rebottling of Foucauldian wine. What sort of counterpower? Counterpower, reply Hardt and Negri, construed as a loose aggregate of diverse individuals refusing hierarchy, transcendence, and authority.

Antihumanism [. . .] conceived as a refusal of any transcendence should in no way be confused with a negation of the *vis viva*, the creative life force that animates the revolutionary stream of modern tradition. [. . .] Once we recognize our posthuman bodies and minds, once we see ourselves for the simians and cyborgs we are, we then need to explain the *vis viva*, the creative powers that animate us [. . .] and actualize our potentialities.⁸⁹

"*Vis viva*" is but a Latinized embellishment of Bataille's energy of the core. What could pass for seminew, instead, is the flashing appearance on the screen of the cyborg, though even that is all too derivative, again, of Bataille's *Acéphale*, whereas the added thrill of the "posthuman" monkey, though charming, fails to shock entirely. What else? . . . Why, the abhorrence of the Eurocentric white male, of course: "If the modern is the field of power of the white, the male, the European," our authors recapitulate, "then in perfectly symmetrical fashion the postmodern will be the field of liberation of the non-white, the non-male, and the non-Europeans, the values and voices of the displaced, the marginalized, the exploited and the oppressed."⁹⁰ What is exactly the "non-male"? And wouldn't this list exclude Negri himself, a privileged white European male? At this juncture, roughly between the first and the second act of *Empire*, we finally meet the transfigured symbol of the oppressed multitudes, the son of the core and a reedition of Foucault's lunatic: this is "*the poor*," a figure Hardt and Negri modeled after St. Francis.⁹¹

The poor is God on earth. Today there is not even the illusion of a transcendent God. The poor has dissolved that image and recuperated its power. [. . .] But who is the subject that [. . .] gives a creative meaning to language—who if not the poor

[. . .], impoverished and powerful, always more powerful? [. . .] The poor itself is power. [. . .] Even the prostituted body, [. . .] the hunger of the multitude—all forms of the poor have become productive. [. . .] The discovery of postmodernity consisted in the repositioning of the poor at the center of the political and productive terrain.⁹²

The “poor,” as a collectivity, are believed by the authors to be the “powerful,” “extraordinarily wealthy and productive agents” of “absolute democracy.” Possessed of a “swarm intelligence,” “with no central control,” they fan themselves out in phalanxes, “[sliding] across the barriers [of Empire, and burrowing] connecting tunnels that undermine the walls.”⁹³ These “hobos,” “full of knowledges,” are the yeast of globalization’s “liberatory potentials,” and their convulsive moving athwart the confines of Empire in a perennially undecided match is the emblem of history, which, for Hardt and Negri, “develops in contradictory and aleatory ways, constantly subject to chance and accident.”⁹⁴ When they take power, the “hobos” shall redefine “truth,” which, by the bye, is regarded as but an accessory “in the age of Empire.” Whether this implies that the poor shall lie in turn, and thereby begin to oppress as in Foucault’s tribunals of “prejudicial-justice,” is not clear. “Difference and mobility,” Hard and Negri believe, “are not liberatory in themselves, but neither are truth, purity and stasis.” “Truth,” they say, “will not make us free, but taking control of the production of truth will [. . .]. The real truth commissions of Empire will be constituent assemblies of the multitudes.”⁹⁵ Uniting their voice to the choir of protest of South African blacks, Hardt and Negri chant: “We are the Poors!”⁹⁶

Of course, they are.

Even Satan and Dracula have a cameo in this epic. “My name is legion for we are many,” this the Evil One had once told Christ in the grand narrative of the Gospel.⁹⁷ Thus, Hardt and Negri fashioned the “poor” as the “legions of Multitude,” which are “composed of innumerable elements that remain different from one another, and yet communicate, collaborate, and act in common. “Now that,” the authors exclaim, “is really demonic!” The Multitude is “a flesh that is not a body”; it is a lecherous vampire thirsting for ever more flesh.⁹⁸

We are all monsters—high-school outcasts, sexual deviants, freaks, survivors of pathological families and so forth.⁹⁹

Stripped of the erudite frills, the leftist patter and the kitsch cutouts with which Hardt and Negri have attempted to sex up their overhyped postmodern-soap opera, *Empire*’s depiction of the propertyless classes is a distasteful blend of conservative populism and of Liberal hypocrisy. Conservative and untrue, because behind the disarmingly phony paean of the “hobo” lies the tacit endorsement of a societal model that breeds such homeless, drifting ghosts as a matter of course. Indeed, a fair dose of misanthropy must be relied upon to sing such a hollow praise of the poor and to pass off their broken speech as a kind of accomplished discourse. It can only be an inured capacity to loathe that enables some to characterize as “wealthy, knowledgeable and powerful” that which has been

stunted and rendered impotent. What can bring a privileged individual to flatter “the poor” so extravagantly if not the wish to see them remain precisely where they are?

Finally, an agenda.

Is there one? No. Never expect the Foucauldians to give concrete advice. Hardt and Negri write so themselves, that they are here to offer us “conceptual bases”;¹⁰⁰ they are here to help us think, not to provide hard-and-fast pointers. Hardt and Negri are at a loss for remedies. Nor do they hide it; twice in both books (*Empire* and *Multitude*) do they concede that they do not know how counter-Empire is concretely to come about.¹⁰¹ Realizing, however, that it may be bad business to refuse to suggest *anything* to the generous reader, who has hitherto plodded through nearly 800 pages (for both tomes) of narcotic verbiage, they venture a few recommendations.

- “We have to accept the challenge and learn how to think globally.”¹⁰²
- We must strive to “transform, mutate and create anew our posthuman bodies.” That is, “dress in drag,” tattoo, pierce ourselves,¹⁰³ and shape our physique into a “body that is incapable of adapting to family life, to factory discipline, to the regulations of a traditional sex, and so forth.”¹⁰⁴
- Fight the global fight with confidence knowing that we “are the masters of the world because our desire and labor regenerate it continuously.”¹⁰⁵
- We should grant residency papers to immigrant laborers, guarantee a social wage to all citizens, and exclude exploitation.¹⁰⁶
- Institute a “global parliament.”¹⁰⁷
- Impose a tax on international financial transactions (the so-called Tobin tax).¹⁰⁸
- Read the news from Indymedia, and promote “open source” sharing of intellectual property (which amounts to a relaxation of copyrights and to a diffusion of innovative techniques on the Web).¹⁰⁹
- We must wield “new weapons.” (1) “Consider, for example, as an experiment [. . .], the new kiss-ins conducted by Queer Nation in which men would kiss men and women women in a public place to shock people who are homophobic[. . .]” (2) Have “people in the streets for a demonstration.”¹¹⁰

And thus the movie ends.

It had begun, swollen with realistic anticipation. It rolled on a few Liberal catch phrases, and then gradually lost itself in overcooked sci-fi *déjà vu* and droll plugs of cyberpunk, before imploding, through one of those unfortunate shifts in narrative tone, in the tomfoolery of adolescent misfit-melodrama (viz. “we are all high-school outcasts, freaks . . . ”). Its final take is a sorry avowal of impotence.

Of this prescriptive section, the sensible items (from the Tobin tax to “open source” sharing) are obviously not original to *Empire*’s analysis; these are limited reforms that have been on the table for some time. The remainder are either trite (“exclude exploitation”), meaningless (“think globally”) or downright inane (the piercings and the same-sex “kiss-ins”).

The portrait of economic change offered by Hardt & Negri bears a striking resemblance to the sort of analysis routinely offered by *The Economist* and the *Wall Street Journal*. [...] [It] is barely distinguishable from standard versions of globalization.¹¹¹

"Metapower" liked *Empire* much.

Harvard University Press published *Empire* in a good-looking edition, and the very mouthpiece of Anglo-American "imperialism," the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR), gave the book a favorable review, which appears on the back cover. Pleased, CFR's quarterly, the world-renowned *Foreign Affairs*, commented: "The authors argue that globalization is not eroding sovereignty but transforming it into a system of diffuse national and supranational institutions." *The New York Times*, on the other hand, found that *Empire* may be the "next big idea." Establishment kudos for our postmodern, neo-Marxian "rebels." What a gift to the oligarchs this has been since Foucault: to contend, with a straight face that, in politics, the center does not matter. And that same-sex "kiss-ins" might be an avenue to changing the brutal ways of our world . . .

Dissent's response to *Empire* has been rather undifferentiated. On the one hand, the book has become the theoretical reference of the postmodern Left, especially in the aftermath of 9/11—to incorporate which, *Multitude* was hastily drafted; and on the other, the evanescent, antioligarchic wing of Marxism—which has not defected to postmodernism—has critiqued the book in forward, yet overall restrained, terms. The critics have lamented *Empire*'s "idiosyncratic" abstractness and absence of "concrete illustrations,"¹¹² the groundlessness of concepts such as "the virtual proletariat,"¹¹³ and its being "an obstacle to the development of a successful movement against [...] global capitalism."¹¹⁴ Overall, the exchange has remained circumscribed and urbane—which is to say that postmodernism has reaffirmed its hegemony over that wasteland strewn with rubble that we call "the Left."

Hardt's and Negri's commentary to 9/11 and the War on Terror will be related in chapter 9, in connection with the general theme of the Left's reaction to the new season of wars at the dawn of the third millennium.

Postmodernism is doublespeak, of a sort that has emerged from the ashes of the sixties, and has been decisively shaped by the vicissitudes of that epoch. Its clearest trait, since Foucault's induction in the United States, is its manifest affectation, its phoniness. Intellectual mercenaries possessed with a knack for perfidious gab are the ones sought after, and past proper selection they rise to become postmodern luminaries.

Postmodern talk is the idiom of power, and as such it is designed to mask a variety of embarrassing truths; it is designed to uphold the status quo (viz. *Empire*'s globalization blurbs) and to discredit antagonistic forces for the good, such as compassion, which the French neo-Gnostics, from Bataille onward have not ceased to harass and revile for an instant (on paper at least). The maintenance and upkeep of postmodern doublespeak has been perforce assigned to the salaried employees of public discourse—academics, publicists, and ministerial

flaks. The truths that this sort of doublespeak is expected to conceal are chiefly the actual mechanics and dynamics of power (i.e., social control, foreign policy, and wealth distribution), on the one hand, and America's failure of racial integration, on the other (the rise of cultural studies).

It has been said that multiculturalism plugged "a gaping intellectual hole" in the American panorama. "Robbed of a utopian hope," of ideas with which to shape the future, disillusioned "liberals and leftists" have retreated "in the name of progress to celebrate diversity."¹¹⁵ No postmodern ever conducts a challenging critique of the prevailing economic system that "stands as invariant." "No divergent political or economic vision animates cultural diversity. From the most militant Afrocentrists to the most ardent feminists, all quarters subscribe to very similar beliefs about work, equality, and success."¹¹⁶ Yet they all sojourn separately, each clutching at his and her own raft of gender/race specificity, marching to whatever tune a diversity-savvy administration should improvise. "The secret of cultural diversity is its political and economic uniformity." Thus, in the corridors of power and higher learning, the only fight among the irremediably "diverse" is one for "a bigger piece of the same action."¹¹⁷

In general[,] multiculturalism[,] both as a slogan and an intellectual practice[,] has signified integration and subordination into the prevailing disciplinary construction of academic knowledge.¹¹⁸

By the time the new postmodern vanguard had solidly entrenched itself in the tenured nodes of the academic network, it had become patent that this system of belief had exhausted its "theoretical" reserves. More than a decade ago, America's Foucauldians were already grappling with the "problematic" legacy of Power/Knowledge. Many of them came to recognize that Foucauldian word-games afforded no prospects of liberation (resistance at margins offers no issue), and that, even though the multicultural movement had changed the face of academia, the barriers dividing the whites from the representatives of the "disqualified" groups, and these groups from one another, appeared no less forbidding than they were before. Soon, some began fretting over this absence of "solidarity" and "community, and thought they should instead "seek others out."¹¹⁹ They were to reconquer unity, that is, though *never* outside the "agonistics" of diversity (viz. *Multitude*). Which is an absurdity. In any event, the system had no tolerance for such disingenuousness of the eleventh hour. The mocking varlets of the postmodern Left were chiefly needed in the arena of public discourse, where they were to engage their counterparts of the Right in a purposefully interminable and spurious match between "conservatism" and "progressivism." Ever since, the textual "trace" of this weird, virtual joust has been sold on the marketplace as the written evidence of America's democratic fitness.

CHAPTER 8

The Tomb Raiders of the Postmodern Right: Jünger's Anarch, the Neocon, and the Bogus Hermeneutics of Leo Strauss

In the face of these looming forces, the emerging State recasts the people in its *real* truth. Springing from this truth, power/knowledge soars, genuinely—the power/knowledge that is at once duty/knowledge and will/knowledge. But to know this, signifies: to master thoroughly the essence of things, and by virtue of this, to be determined to achieve something [. . .], In your name, I commit myself before the will and the work of our Führer, Adolf Hitler [. . .], Heil Hitler!

Martin Heidegger, Academic allocution, November 25, 1933¹—

For the past decade, and especially since the beginning of the presidency of George Bush Jr. (January 2001), there has been a great deal of talk about the phenomenon of “neoconservatism.” Its critics have portrayed this sub-current of the Republican Party as some sort of revolutionary, unscrupulous populism. They suggested that the U.S. administration has been taken over by an ideologically compact phalanx of megalomaniacal policymakers, who have hijacked the pragmatic tradition of America and manipulated the situation to the advantage of certain Interests (oil, weaponry, etc.), in particular by means of war and fear. In sum, the Neocons, as they’ve come to be labeled, have been seen as the responsible authors of a discrete jump, “a clean break” in the foreign and domestic policy of the United States. Allegedly, this change has been characterized by the exasperation of plutocracy at home (via tax breaks and a myriad of probusiness concessions targeting only the wealthiest) and the undeterred promotion of war abroad relying to a great extent on the raging devoutness of the country’s Christian evangelicals.

This presumed hostile takeover of the Neocons has naturally been accompanied by a deafening blare of pronouncements, televised jeremiads, and torrents of social, political, and geopolitical “analysis,” for the most part crafted by

individuals, who, in one way or another, have been connected to the enigmatic figure of Leo Strauss.

Born in Germany in 1899, Strauss became an American citizen and taught as a professor of political theory at the University of Chicago during the fifties and sixties. He died in 1973, leaving behind a shadowy legacy and a peculiar exegesis of the classics, which several in the Liberal camp have lately fingered as the ciphered scroll that inspired the late political subversion of the Neocons.²

Entirely justified is the profound indignation of these critics at the mayhem in Iraq and the mendacity with which the present U.S. administration has handled the affair so far. But to lay the blame of such disasters on the shadow of Strauss is to confuse the issue somewhat. The Neocon time in power represents no break whatsoever with the imperial aspirations of the United States. Today's blustery tirades of the Pentagon's and ministries' spokespersons are simply attuned to the specific orientation of the administration's geopolitical agenda. An agenda, which, since the British laid it out in the early 1900s, has not changed.

This is to say that the Neocons are a mere propagandistic front agitating on behalf of the segment within the establishment that, in the game of power, eschews *temporary* composition with the other world players and pushes unrelentingly for the peremptory deployment of U.S. forces in all zones of strategic importance. These are stewards acting in the interest of powers *that are in a rush*. Simply put, the Neocons are a War Party, which is wont to appear under particular sets of conditions. And, of course, in times of war, the budget for military expenditure swells, and the fanatics are made to rave. This is the rule, rather than the exception.

The neo-cons are part of the ideological apparatus of the military/industrial complex, a very important part to be sure; in many respects they are the main propagandists. This is a role they acquired quite late. [. . .] We should not overdo their importance. Basically the neo-cons are flaks.³

By demonizing the Neocons excessively, one may lose sight of the greater picture. As we shall have occasion to reiterate later, the "Liberal" administration of Bush II's predecessor, Bill Clinton, had by the end of his *first* term (in 1996) already a million dead Iraqis on its conscience, *half of them children*. In comparison, Bush Jr., now half way through his second term, could claim but a fraction of such a death toll.

And yet, despite the obvious continuity of geopolitical pursuit between partisan administrations, there *has* been something different in the air since Bush Jr. came to power, and especially since 9/11, of course. If things were bad before, many seem to agree that they are presently worse. When the belligerence is uttered with extraordinary violence, and sophisticated war games are fine-tuned to provoke among the masses fear of the most unreasoning kind—a clime of manifest oppression, doublespeak, erroneous thinking, and intolerance is surely bound to enthrone itself.

So Strauss. It is an indisputable fact that since the beginning of the War on Terror, the vast majority of those scriveners appointed to fashion the bellicose

discourse of the government have paid homage, more or less openly and competently, to the name of Leo Strauss. Again, this is not to imply that his writings might have given someone in the administration some nasty idea; likewise, neither Bataille nor Foucault inspired the multicultural politics of acrimony. It is rather when the times take a particular turn for the worse that we witness the unmistakable *adoption* and emergence of a language and of a thought structure that in some elaborate form preconize the worship of the Void and the brazen acquiescence in violence.

Therefore, just as the works of the French antihumanists have been imported and modified to fit a specific political exigency, the brand of propaganda, in stock, that happened to match the warmongering requirements of the Bush administration was the Straussian tradition. This might have been more than a contingency plan: it is the very affinity that is interesting and revealing. By studying what Strauss had advocated, we may presume to learn something about the nature and deeper intentions of the leadership that has fluently and speedily adapted his speech. The same goes for Bataille and his postmodern epigones.

And so it appears that, within the realm of public discourse, the tandem Bataille/Foucault, on the Left, has been counterpoised on the Right by Straussian political philosophy. Nowadays, in fact, there isn't much choice left; the old formations having dissolved, the leftists are somewhat hurried into the Foucauldian camp, whereas the patriots are urged to root for Strauss, or whatever the Neocon vicars interpret Strauss to mean. Because no one reads Strauss, who is, indeed, illegible. Which fact does not in the least complicate our argument, however, because Bataille, though essential, is still a stranger to the English-speaking world, and Foucault himself is becoming disposable. Presently, both in graduate and postgraduate postmodern/multicultural curricula an increasing number of certified instructors speak the Foucauldian tongue without having ever read or even heard of the originals—indoctrination is effected by an array of diluted vulgates. And this is even more remarkably the case with Strauss and the literature of the Right, as we shall argue throughout this chapter.

But what is of overarching importance in this whole affair is that all these perplexing thinkers from Bataille to Strauss, whose works were respectively processed by the establishment to fashion Left-wing and Right-wing invective, *did share a vision of the world and creation that was literally identical*.

It is the merit of the pioneering monographs of Professor Drury to have established this fundamental connection between the postmoderns of the Left and those of the Right by way of the Russian Hegelian Alexandre Kojève.⁴ Kojève is a smoking gun of sorts: as we shall see, he taught in Paris a number of intellectuals, including Bataille himself, and remained throughout his life a very close friend and intellectual companion of Strauss. Like the one-time Nazi Martin Heidegger, whom he greatly admired, Kojève is a constant reference of the postmoderns, both on the Left and on the Right.

And thus the circle is closed. This finding alone is sufficient proof that dissent is being methodically stamped out of America's academic and political planes by the active promotion of two seemingly opposed strains of thinking—one of

Luciferian insubordination, the other of technicized zealotry, as it were. Antagonistic strains of behavior that are issued in truth from a common fount of disbelief and warmongering impatience, and which, together, work in strange ways to mute within ourselves empathy for others and peaceableness, while feeding the brute, firming its cynicism and animalistic egoism.

Turning to the specifics of America's Right-wing postmodern literature, one may remark that it does not at all afford a specular image to that of the Left. Compared with the latter, it has clearly suffered from a very late start: it is thin, meager, and of exceedingly poor quality. Beyond the hackneyed parallels with World War II, Yankee bombast, Puritan righteousness, and armchair machismo, the Neocon production as a whole does not exhibit a single creative image or concept—even if corrupt. Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* is the best the Neocon house can offer. Deprived of the buttress of the post-9/11 rage, such propaganda would instantly turn into dust.

Strauss is a poor counterpart to Bataille, and there appears to be no equivalent of Foucault's prophethood on the Right. Contrasted to the muscular suppleness of the postmodern Left, this Neocon rhetoric, dependent as it is on the highly imaginative scenarios of the newscasts, shows thereby not to possess narrative powers of its own.

Still, at this time, the Neocon enterprise has managed to market a recognizable type of merchandise that for all intents and purposes enjoys the official sponsorship of the most powerful executive on earth, and this reality needs to be reckoned with.

In this chapter, we should like to reassess the entire experience of the postmodern Right by inviting to the table the “stone guest” of this movement; in other words, we should like to precede the discussion of the usual neoconservative suspects with a retrospective glance on the personage that in our view stands as the most authentic standard-bearer of uncompassionate elitism, Ernst Jünger.

By inscribing Jünger into the roster of postmodernism, several records may be set straight. First, due credit and attention would thus be given to one of the West's most phenomenal literary talents—one virtually unknown in the English-speaking world. Second, his presence would afford the condign counterimage to Bataille's sophistication, for which Strauss's production is no match. Third, Jünger's testimony, far from being some sort of aesthetic add-on, is here presented as the most refined expression of the very creed that underlies the message of the Straussians. In other terms, we contend that if Strauss, say, had chosen to speak explicitly and had known how to write, the form of his texts would have approached (asymptotically) the stylistic perfection of Jünger's compositions. Fourth: what is more, this presumed convergence between Jünger and the postmodern conservatives is *not* a matter of spiritual *coincidence*—indeed, Jünger's social observations of the early thirties were acknowledged by his acquaintance, Heidegger, as a decisive inspiration on his own political stance. Heidegger, in turn, exerted, as known, a profound influence on scores of postmodernists, including Foucault on the Left and Kojève and Strauss on the Right.

So, in the end, this polyphonic ensemble forms a (postmodern) regimented order of sorts, whose binding tenets may be stenographically listed thus: the embrace of violence and of the cult of war, the lust for power, the creed in the Void beyond death, the acquiescence in oligarchic and tyrannical domination, the belief in the scourge of overpopulation, the necessary clash of peoples, and the fascination with the corrupted “word.”

The controversial aspect of the connection to Jünger—and Heidegger, as well—is that, though the Nazi tryst of the latter has been (curiously) forgiven, the record and credentials of the former have remained to this day heatedly disputed. Yet we shall have ample room to prove that Jünger’s opus embodies the highest, most elitist form of what may be termed “Nazi lore.” If that is the case, what would this connection entail for this whole postmodern investment, considering how elegantly Jünger’s collection of sketches and poetic odysseys presents itself to the reader as a perfect synthesis of all that is postmodern?

This chapter comprises five sections, each respectively devoted to: Ernst Jünger, Heidegger, Kojève, Strauss, and American Neoconservatism.

Jünger’s Anarch

I know Venus when she wallows in decay. And I know the black love-goddess, who, at Satan’s masses, squirts the priest’s revolting sacrifice over the body of the virgin. [. . .] I know the vilest Venus—or shall I say, the purest?—the one which weds man to the flower.

Hanns Heinz Ewers, *The White Maiden*⁵

Some have said that in Germany’s literary pantheon, Ernst Jünger (1895–1998) should stand to the right of father Goethe. Most likely, though, he wore an aura too somber and too sinister to be seen in such lofty company. Jünger was something of a titan. A stylist and novelist of superhuman bravura, he lived to be 103 years of age. The scrolls of his collected visions form possibly the most comprehensive and fascinating fresco of the twentieth century.

Not yet out of high school in August 1914, Jünger volunteered in the District of Hanover to serve in the Great War. He would fight four full years in the Flanders.

He proved to be a prodigious warrior.

Wounded fourteen times, his men soon swore he was gifted with invulnerability. Pluri-decorated, he finished the war as a commander of the shock troops with the rank of lieutenant, and the Reich came to confer upon him the highest honor, the *Ordre pour le mérite*. He was 23, the youngest individual thus honored during the Great War.

I noticed at once a British soldier who, behind the third enemy line, was walking above cover, drawing a neat silhouette on the horizon, with his khaki uniform. I tore the rifle away from the nearest sentry, set the sight at six hundred meters, aimed at the man slightly to the side of his head and pulled the trigger. He took

three more steps, then fell on his back, as if the legs had been swept from under his body; he waved his arms and rolled into the crater of a grenade. For a long time thereafter we saw through the binoculars the shining brown sleeve protruding from the brim.⁶

He had not hated the war. He had breathed it in; he had accepted it, like the seasons, like the portal to a world of discovery. He had kept a precise impression of the war's body language—of the pace and speed of death, and of the ritual of massacre, with its cadence of silence, shock, and camaraderie, its dance around the foe, and that instant covered by the sigh of the moribund mate. The load of all this had invested Jünger decisively. War presumably had given him, and others, a new conscience. He had "ripened in the storms."⁷ And from such a mutation there seemed to be no return.

Jünger had squeezed the incisive accounts of his experience at the front in a series of notebooks. His father recognized the importance of such documents and helped to see them published. They appeared in 1920 in a book titled *In the Storms of Steel*. To date, this is still Jünger's most notorious work. A classic still in print, *In the Storms of Steel* was instantly hailed a masterpiece, which earned the young writer not only the admiration and respect of Germany's war veterans and conservative elite, but also the accolade of Europe's intellectuals and literati, who unanimously praised the book's honesty, virtuoso powers of description, and a narrative leanness that afforded the telling of war a relief never seen before. Another, then unknown, decorated veteran of the Reich, named Adolf Hitler, revered the book as well.

Then, finding himself in possession of this newly found and recognized talent, Jünger began to sublimate the experience of war; he began to treat it no longer like a veteran-chronicler, but like a "poet."

War, he wrote, is "the genitor of all things"; "to live is to kill." War awakes the "beast" in us, sharpens our "blood thirst" and the primal yearning to "annihilate the enemy."⁸ But war, more than anything, is for man the occasion to grasp one of the existential truths that make his species unique: and that is the power "to master oneself in death." Man alone is called to such a deed, and he is not capable of anything higher. Something for which, indeed, even the immortal gods envy him.⁹

The hell of war is an inhabited cosmos:

All the mysteries of the grave lay in such atrocious bareness that the most infernal dreams paled before them. Tufts of hair fell from the skulls like pale foliage from autumnal trees. Putrefied bodies melted into the greenish flesh of fish, which glowed at night through the shredded uniforms. If one stepped on them, the foot would leave behind fluorescent prints. Some desiccated into chalky mummies, which slowly frittered away. On others, the flesh peeled off the bones like maroon jelly. During humid nights, jets of gas that shot through the wounds hissing and fizzing, made these swollen cadavers rise to spectral life. But most horrifying was the bubbling swarm that streamed out of those whose bodies were but a lump of innumerable worms.¹⁰

These glimpses were published in 1922 in a compendium, of an intimate sort, devised to complement *In the Storms of Steel*, which Jünger entitled *The Battle as an Inner Experience*. In France, this memoir appeared in 1934 as *La Guerre, notre mère* ("Our Mother, War"). The front cover of the French edition might not have mentioned "an inner experience," but the book was captured all the same by the watch of Bataille, who wrote an ecstatic commentary of the excerpt just cited.

"This," Bataille wrote, "is the language of mysticism. This great preoccupation with horror is neither vice nor gloom. It is the threshold of a church." Bataille was arguing that war, ritual sacrifice, and mystical life were bound by a relation of equivalence, and Jünger's testimony seemed to prove his assumption.¹¹

Wearing comfortably the laurels of the poet-warrior of anti-Republican Germany, Jünger spent the rest of the twenties writing mostly about the "*naked experience*" of war—or rather, about the destiny of the warrior in modern times against a backdrop of irremediable, and perennial, *defeat*.¹² He was solidly in the conservative camp. A knight of the rueful countenance, lamenting the sunset of aristocratic chivalry, he stood pondering on high over the teeming unrest of that threatening nebula, known as Germany's Conservative Revolution, which was moving to destroy the Weimar Republic from the very moment the Allies had foisted it upon the defeated Fatherland.

Beginning in 1929 and throughout the first half of the thirties, however, eager to extend the radius of his literary ambition, Jünger set out to map the spiritual landscapes of his times. He had perfected his studies, adding a refined scholarship to the sword, and felt he could now continue to fight by projecting the struggle onto a different plane.

And so he wondered: Why couldn't Germany win the war? Or better, why did America win it more efficiently than all the other powers? Because America, untrammeled by the Reich's feudal privileges and limited suffrage, had been capable of effecting a *total mobilization*—a swift, victorious and total mobilization of her *credit* and *human* endowments. Germany had eventually attempted to catch up with the American commonwealth, succeeding in part but too late, and with the progressive elimination of aristocratic privileges in the structure of the administration had also vanished "the concept of the warrior caste."

The "total mobilization" (*die totale Mobilmachung*) wasn't simply another characterization of the West's second industrial divide; the change was epochal, or rather, "cosmic." For Jünger, this shift signified the supersession of the bourgeois revolution by a novel form of collective organization, which approached ever more closely the *realm of insect life*.¹³ "In no case," Jünger wrote in 1932 with postmodern foresight, "does man represent a definite notion."¹⁴

With the industrial carnage of World War I and the experience of "world revolution," the West had entered the "cultural" era of "work," of technicized toil (*der Arbeit, die Technik*). Jünger saw men as "workers" (*Arbeiter*), not in the Marxist acceptance of the word, but as units of a collective engine, fueled by a will to power. From the "unbounded space of power" (*Macht*), humanity, en masse, had come to claim its right to "domination" (*Herrschaft*). These new men, who marched through a sweep of "fire and ice," were the intersection "of passion

and mathematics.” Therefore, this was bound to be a time marked by “a love, more fiery, and by a more terrible and merciless cruelty.” Jünger was not describing a variation in economic structure, but rather detailing *the rise of another spiritual mode*. Yesterday, he said, the masses were led by “lawyers”; today, instead, the workers are fronted by “*condottieri*”—avid chieftains preoccupied with the dynamics of prepotence.¹⁵

The times had changed, yet again.¹⁶

Gone was also our human right to *pain* (*der Schmerz*), thought Jünger—swallowed by the modern conceit that suffering is but a “prejudice,” which reason alone may strike dead at any time. This rationalist intoxication had, since the Enlightenment, “produced a long series of practical measures”: for instance, “*the abolition of torture* and of slavery, the invention of the lightning-rod, vaccines, anesthesia, [and] insurance.”¹⁷ When it came to torture, fascinatingly, an image that appears most obsessively in Jünger’s meditations is the torment of the regicide Damiens, a voyeuristic description of which happens to open Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*:

When the henchmen had exhausted their arts on Damiens, one could hear him laugh. It is here that the boundary of tyrannical power is drawn.¹⁸

The bourgeois had striven to fence up “*danger*” by means of “*security*” systems and “probability calculus.”¹⁹ And the more the drive to mechanize life attempted to push back the siren-call to suffer, the more violently pain would cascade upon society to “claim its arrears” “with implacable logic,” thus reestablishing an existential balance that appears to be governed by rigorous laws.²⁰

Modern society in the thirties must have appeared to Jünger as a conglomerate of mechanized termitaries, of clockwork beehives, animated by swarms of automaton employees—the armies of *Arbeit*—shedding skin and passing life in the plastified cocoons of their sanitized space. At the periphery, and in the “*side-streets*” of this new complex of power, however, there breeds the subproletariat (*das Lumpenproletariat*)—an altogether different species, which lives by the aboriginal form of the “herd.” To Jünger, the subproletariat was something of an authentic, anarchoid beast, which has retained in its collective soul vestiges of the “genuine combat style.” Unlike the modern mass, which “kills in a mechanical fashion,” tearing and stampeding, the subproletariat nurtures a “more eloquent” relationship with pain: the proletarian rabble, indeed, “is in familiar terms with the pleasures of torture.”

The mass is swayed by impulses of a moral sort, it bestirs itself in a state of excitation and indignation, and it must convince itself that the enemy is somehow evil, so that it may mete out punishment to him. The sub-proletariat stands squarely outside the sphere of moral judgments; it is thereby always and everywhere prone to attack, whenever the established order totters. [. . .] It thus stands also outside the realm of politics; one must regard it rather as a sort of *underground reserve*, which is at the disposal of the events.²¹

The leading role within the subproletariat goes to “*the Partisan*.” The Partisan is the supergrass: he has one foot in the police station, the other in the gutter; he is

not a hero.²² He may be seen on the heels of invading armies, spying, sabotaging, informing, and disinforming the factions and their counterfactions all at once.

The subproletariat and its partisans are the rejects of the world of Labor/Technique,²³ which makes its subjects—the vast majority of what we call the world's citizenry, that is, us—wielders of “pure power.”²⁴ Jünger always found it diverting to observe these modern masses of conforming men and women speaking of themselves as *individuals* and good democrats, “philanthropists and Marxists,” when in fact, one could add that, seen from a distance, together, they often appear to compose a giant sledgehammer, whose operation is beyond their ken. And it was as wielders of power, and not as hypocrites, that Jünger took a liking to people.²⁵

The momentous significance of *Technique* for Jünger was not truly attached to phenomena of industrial transformation; rather, *what fascinated him deeply was Technique's will “to subjugate bodies” (den menschlichen Körper zu unterstellen)*.²⁶

This flesh disciplined and regimented by the will with such a painstaking care, gives the impression of having become somehow indifferent to the wound.²⁷

In the era of Labor/Technique, instead of it being looked upon as a mere “outpost,” *life* had been enthroned as “the supreme value.” And in the process, the knowledge of “sacrifice”—this other technique of ungluing life from itself, as it were—was lost as well.²⁸ Under the gaze of the clinical eye, the patient's body had become medicine's “object.” “Illness” was thenceforth the physician's “strategy.”²⁹

Doubtless, Jünger observed, the mathematics and logic at work behind all the spiritual metamorphosis of our era “are extraordinary and worthy of awe,” but their “game,” he concluded, “is far too sophisticated and rigorous to have been born of a human mind.” The spirit that had been chiseling the European landscape since the mid-nineteenth century, Jünger averred, was “without a doubt a cruel spirit.” What this spirit's labor ultimately achieved was a clearing of the “ancient cults,” the effacement of archaic religion, whose voided halls were being squatted by “the creative impotence of the cultures, and the gray mediocrity distinguishing the actors on stage.” For Jünger, this sunset of the warrior-aristocrat heralded the dawn of Labor/Technique, which, using the idiom of myth, he alternatively referred to as *nihilism*—as that spiritual condition characterized by the gods' desertion of the human realm before the waxing tide of the technological regimentation of life. The world was now peopled by teams of “Titans”—Promethean bearers of technology and the precise arts of mastering fire, for the purpose of annihilation, of war.³⁰

What to do in the face of this “cruel” precipitation? Not surprisingly, Jünger's prescription presaged Bataille's final monition in the *Accursed Share*:

Practically, it follows from this that the individual, in spite of all, ought to take part in the war machine, whether because he sees in it the preparation to the sunset, or because, upon the hills where the crosses rot and the palaces crumble, he believes to recognize that disquiet which is wont to precede the advent of a new lordship (*Feldherrenzeichen*).³¹

Brace yourself, Jünger advised, and man the titanic machine, following unquestioningly this blind craving for force and prevarication, which henceforth has shown to expresses itself through a new, methodical, yet no less devastating application of *violence*.

Before proceeding further, a brief comment may be in order. What is striking in these Jüngerian insights of the early thirties is not merely their remarkable and indisputable affinity to Bataille's contemporary reflections. Indeed, one may establish a perfect correspondence between Jünger's tripartition of the social realm and Bataille's sacred sociology: (1) The fading warrior caste in Jünger matches Bataille's sovereign, heterogeneity of the Master; (2) The "nihilistic" sphere of "work" mobilized by the latter-day tyrant ("the *condottiere*") is the analog of Bataille's *power* maneuvered by the *butor*; and (3) it is easy to recognize in the subproletariat and its hordes of partisans Bataille's heterogeneous droves of slaves, who by nature empathize with the heroic figure of the criminal. It is the exact same story, the same plot. Yet not only does Jünger anticipate Bataille by a few seasons, but his essay "on pain" (*Über den Schmerz*) also preceded by forty years—which is even more formidable—the images and language of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*,³² with the conspicuous overlap of the "*délinquant*" and the "partisan," the (bemoaned) end of torture, the clinical eye, the subjugation of bodies, the disciplined flesh, and the invasion of power. It is all in Jünger by 1934—couched in the same words, and much more succinctly.

In 1929, Jünger had wished expressly to see National-Socialism prevail in Germany.³³ But by the time Hitler seized power, Jünger had come to appraise the poise and agility of Nazism's political makeup with a more discriminating eye, and had as a result resolved to keep his distance and act with circumspection vis-à-vis the incoming Nazi hierarchy.

Before power, I know precisely what I have to do, I have to take precautions, I have to bow in such and such a manner.³⁴

In 1933, he refused to join the German academy of poetry, which the Nazis had proceeded to colonize; he left Berlin and settled in the countryside. Unlike Bataille—and, as we shall see, Strauss—there is little doubt that, at this time, Jünger was part of a secret order (a veritable one, not some harlequin mysteriosophy like *l'Acéphale*, or Strauss's bogus elitist fellowship between master and pupils at Chicago). The induction among a very particular set of initiates (*Eingeweihten*) provided a recurrent, and defining, form to Jünger's narrative constructions. With reference to the interwar years, he alluded often, and cryptically, to his allegiance to the Order of the "Mauretanians." Jünger employed this designation after that figure of the "African sorcerer" in the *Arabian Nights*, who casts about the world in search of a simpleton (Aladdin), through whom he may lay hold of the grail (the lamp as the key to world domination).

Filled with "utter disgust for the great masses," Jünger joined the Order by passing "the test," which consisted of "sacrificing compassion for the sake of supreme power." Thus, he had willed to make a "superman" of his being, "erecting within himself an idol, which lent a golden shimmer to his features."³⁵

Ever since, hands clasped over the pommel of his sword, Jünger, the narrator, could be seen looking on and brooding over the vicissitudes of the Fatherland or the quakes of his turbulent times, perched from an elitist lookout, variously recorded in his dreamy tales as the Rue-Garden Hermitage, the *Volière* (the Aviary), or the Casbah. From these rocky heights, towering over imaginary peninsulas, which blend the North African coastline with Dalmatian archipelagoes suffused with the aroma of cypresses, he surveyed quilted swaths of boscage and marshlands in the far distance, where the shadow of conflict between ever-changing powers of evil and the values defended by his aristocratic stronghold grew taller by the hour.

Mysterious rituals, featuring fire-wheels and snakes, such as those recounted in his second most celebrious novel—*On the Marble Cliffs* (1939)—occur in the background of a strange microcosm, tenanted by sibylline monks who tend shrines unfailingly consecrated to matriarchal deities—manifestations of Aphrodite imaginatively named “The Virgin of the Sea” (*Maria vom Meer*)³⁶ or “Our Lady of the Crescent, the sickle-bearer” (*Maria Lunaris Falcifera*).³⁷

The Ocean is the cradle from which Aphrodite rises. Wave and rhythm, tension and mixture gush forth from the abyss of the Ocean, which is splendid and terrible.³⁸

Inside the lodges of the Mauretanians, the word must have been to keep clear of any open involvement with the Hitlerites—not out of spiritual distaste, but most likely for the sake of strategic latitude. What with Alfred Rosenberg’s mania for blood purity—which Jünger thought was no remedy against the “destructive qualities of [the Jewish] race”³⁹—the perplexing outlook of Germany’s position on the chessboard of world politics, and the overall crassness of the leadership of the National Socialist German Worker’s Party, aristocrats like the writer had better cultivate layers of reserve within the herbariums and luminaries of their patriotic seclusion.

Which is not to say that Jünger was ever hostile to Hitler. The opposite is true. Not only had he secured, as the author of the *In the Storms of Steel*, the Führer’s protection,⁴⁰ but Jünger’s entire itinerary until the end of World War II is a linear path of complicity with the regime. The conventional explication, according to which *On the Marble Cliffs* was a bold, ciphered indictment of Hitler and the Third Reich, crowned by the foreboding of the Jewish Holocaust and the Stauffenberg plot to assassinate Hitler, is a feat of makeshift exegesis drafted after the war to save Jünger’s reputation. The novel was indeed a pro-Nazi, though defeatist, vision of the forthcoming campaign in the East, against the armies of Stalin, who was portrayed as the demoniac “Chief Ranger.”⁴¹

When the war came—merely two weeks after the publication of *On the Marble Cliffs*—Jünger was drafted and dispatched to France yet again, this time with the rank of captain, to participate in the western offensive. In 1941, thanks to his high contacts, he landed a privileged post in the headquarters of the German occupying army in Paris, at the *Raphaël*—one of the capital’s fashionable hotels. In Paris he kept a journal, in which he recorded the existential

vagaries of a somewhat uncomfortable officer of an invading army, who hobnobbed with the artists and the collaborationist elite of that captured jewel of a city.

Of particular interest in the Parisian journal is that entry, recorded on May 29, 1941, in which he mentioned “the decision not to excuse himself from witnessing the execution of a deserter by firing squad, despite the revulsion with which the prospect filled him.”⁴²

In such encounters I am overtaken with a kind of nausea. I must, however, elevate myself to the level from which, like a doctor before a patient, I can observe such things as if they were fishes on a coral reef or insects in a meadow. [. . .] There lie weaknesses in my disgust, there lies still too great an involvement in the red world.

*One must penetrate the logic of violence.*⁴³

Even if it is understood that individuals possessing the same sensitivity—as Jünger and Bataille certainly did—will end up acting and speaking in a similar fashion, there is always something uncanny in picking out these well-nigh identical testimonies across time and geographical boundaries. Jünger decries his “weaknesses,” while Bataille hates that “part [in him] that sobs and curses” at the sight of the dismembered Chinese regicide. Before an execution, what torments them both is not the horror of truncating a life in the stillness of protocol, no, what aggrieves them is their life-cherishing instinct, which they curse as a forfeiture of cowardice. Because the violence of life, of nature, of men, and of history must have proven to them, and to many others, to be so enduring, so sensible, necessary, and self-contained that one had rather make it as integral a part of one’s flesh as humanly possible.

During the “sitting war” (1939–40), Jünger imagined that Germany and Britain could come to an agreement.⁴⁴ He *did* stand with Hitler and the new Reich—stand with them, that is, for as long as they seemed to be winning.⁴⁵ And when the fortune of the Wehrmacht was reversed after the disaster in Russia, which indeed he had prophesied, Jünger, like many other game-loving foxes at the top, proceeded meticulously to hide his traces. Which is not to say that he entirely escaped the postwar inquisitorial fallout of de-Nazification.

Though Jünger suggested that he had eventually gravitated in oppositional circles, there was never any evidence that he had been in close, active contact with Stauffenberg’s conspirators—which was the favorite line of defense attempted by high-profile personalities who compromised with Nazism. Nor was there proof, on the other hand, that he had been in any way involved with the murderous record of that regime. He came out of the war wearing the pall of controversy, but overall he was unscathed—invulnerable indeed.

Heidegger, as will be seen, and Jünger himself would, together, become the symbol of the rehabilitated holdover from the mists of the Third Reich. And although the two were connected somehow, they would find themselves traveling in the postwar era along different routes. Heidegger would eventually regain the mainstream and enjoy an outstanding revival in the English-speaking world,

whereas Jünger's fame would remain largely confined to Europe. In Italy, for instance, but especially in France, his figure would come to form the object of an authentic veneration, thanks to the combined effort and influence of a certain segment of those countries' intelligentsia, which would feature combative intellectuals from *both ends* of the political spectrum.⁴⁶ The adoration of Jünger (and also of Heidegger) by self-styled exponents of both the Left and the Right is precisely that mark of confusion, addressed in this study, which we take as the eloquent proof that thinking nowadays has been, for the most part, coerced into this postmodern form. The two manifestations of such a form, which is essentially cohesive, are the (affected) insubordination of the chaotic Left and the truculent conservatism of the no-less-cynical Right. Bataille's position between fascism and orgiastic sedition is the genuine symbol of this mood's dangerous ambivalence; Jünger represents its German counterimage, slightly slanted to the Right.

If Heidegger carried the stigma of [the Nazi] transgression for the rest of his life, it did *not* weigh heavily on his reputation. Jünger, on the other hand, is still widely cited as a "fascist writer."⁴⁷

The two were preaching similar versions of the same faith, but, compared with Heidegger's, Jünger's art of disclosure, so to speak, was far too explicit.

With the end of World War II began a new era for Jünger, as for the rest of the world. Change, in some form, could not be avoided. In fact, Jünger had *not* come out of the war unscathed: in November 1944, his first son, Ernst, had been killed in action, near Carrara, in Italy—the boy was eighteen. To his memory, the father dedicated a treatise, which he had begun drafting in 1941. It appeared in 1945 with the title: *The Peace*.

The new Jünger presented himself as a reflective, penitent man who sought to learn from his errors; he confessed he had been "spiritually blinded."⁴⁸ But, no matter how meek he longed to appear, the vision stayed roughly the same. And since 1945 it came flowing, potently, into a whole new installment of characters, metaphors, stylistic rhythms, and special narrative effects no less bewitching, no less dazzling than those past.

I had renounced evil and its pomp, less out of aversion, than because I felt unequal to it.⁴⁹

And so he clasped the sword again, and ascended to his privileged vantage point to scrutinize the world. The knight was back in his dungeon.

He was now looking back upon the era of the "Great Blazes"⁵⁰—the world wars—and musing over the present condition. Historically, what the "Great Blazes," especially the second, had achieved was the destruction of the national States. There presently existed only "great empires" such as America, say, or China.⁵¹ And it was within such imperial domains that the multitude of Work, which, itself, had not disappeared, was reorganizing itself and wielding *power*.

The Blazes, Jünger believed, had challenged the tenure of “nihilism”—in other words, the holocausts of World War II had irremediably shaken the faith in progress, which is one of postmodernism’s chief contentions.⁵² Nihilism was not defeated yet, but for Jünger there was no going back to the Liberal era—that would have meant starting all over again . . . And the only means whereby nihilism might be finished, and “peace” thereby established, was through *“a moral return to the Bible.”* The opponents of Liberal nihilism needed the succor of the Churches. Because, he added, “the man of today *wants* to believe.” The new epoch, he heralded, would see the advent of a “New Theology.”⁵³

Jünger was proposing merely a strategic alliance; of course, he believed neither in the Bible nor in Christ,⁵⁴ whom he actually held responsible for having slain “like a novel and greater Herakles” “the Elder Ones,”⁵⁵ “the primordial spirits of [his] land.”⁵⁶

In 1949, Jünger published his first postwar novel, *Heliopolis*, in which he articulated his perception of contemporary world politics. He imagined that while nihilism was being transformed into some sort of planetary state, on the home front the Churches had joined forces with the aristocracy to fight the contemporary Liberal democracy, whose populist and very popular puppeteer was the Bailiff, a Churchillian sheik with the paunch of an ogre and the taste for neon of a Vegas don.⁵⁷

Heliopolis was a space of memory, old struggles, and new technological forays: the heavens were clawed by periodic launches of space shuttles, and all the people were connected by the “phonophore,” a wireless radio unit pinned on the lapel—a stunning anticipation of the portable telephony of the Internet’s global networking.

In this context, the phonophore had appeared as the ideal agent of planetary democracy, the means to connect invisibly everybody to everybody. The presence of the ancient assembly of the people, of the market, of the forum was extended to a vastest space.⁵⁸

Confronted by the corruption of Liberal nihilism, Jünger re-created a parallel universe, walled by old parchments, solitary walks, and the fumes of drugs. Like the ancient Mexicans, he would ingest them as a sacrament by which to “establish an immediate connection with divine powers.”⁵⁹ Intoxicated, he marveled:

I stand in the experience.⁶⁰

Jünger retold his truths in the “dreams” of hemp, chewing the laurel leaf, in which “slumber the greater forces” that shield the Spirit against “the onslaught of the annihilating Void (*die Vernichtung*).”⁶¹ Beyond death, there was “Nothingness.” There was no “hell”; this to him was Christianity’s “sudden invention.”⁶² He believed that “not a mosquito is lost,” and that even “the worst of criminals shall partake in the eternal delights.” For evil composed the world-plan, much as the shadow accompanied light, in a world whose power mechanisms could best be grasped by the arts of darkness.⁶³

This is what remained: a glimmer on a nebula of the universe; perhaps an angel had guessed that much in his flight in the deep of the remotest abyss.⁶⁴

“‘New’ worlds,” for Jünger, “were always but copies of the same world, well known to the Gnostics, since the origins.”⁶⁵ What this meant, practically, was that one could change the world, but *never* its foundation.⁶⁶ And such a foundation was the pessimist, uncompassionate template with which we have become fully acquainted since Bataille. It was this alternation of light and darkness that culminated in the question mark of the Void.

Life on earth, according to Jünger, could thus be likened to a frightening path running along the edge of a tall cliff upon which only one caravan could pass at a time.⁶⁷ Economically speaking, this was a metaphor for the life of *scarcity*, which, indeed, is one of the pillars of the Liberal ethos—an ethos Jünger profoundly despised. That goes to show that, after all, men like him (or like Bataille, Foucault, and the rest) are not such hefty fish out of modern water as they purported to be. Along with the creed in scarcity goes, of course, the faith in the ravages of *overpopulation*—nowadays a stance that is conveniently mistaken for environmental concern. In our discussion of Foucault, we had already arraigned Malthusianism as the trademark of the ugliest form of oligarchism and conservatism.⁶⁸ For, the chief reason behind its perennial adoption in the face of constant refutation is, of course, its claim that poverty, war, and disease are not the responsibility of men, but of the putative vicious laws of nature: it suggests that there just is not enough bread for all mouths—hence the struggle. Aldous Huxley created his famous dystopian novel *Brave New World* upon such an oligarchic hypothesis. Thus, for Jünger, Malthus and Huxley were “intelligent Englishmen.”⁶⁹

But, for as much as he wished to see his antitraditional knighthood prevail, in the early fifties, Jünger conceded *defeat* before the forces of nihilism. The modern technicized invasion seemed unstoppable and apparently possessed of unimaginable powers of innovation and flexible expansion. Hearses were being motorized, microphones laid onto the altars next to the eucharistic bread, and in this potent movement toward the “reduction” of life to basic mechanical functions—all in the name of the “good”—surrogate cults and religions were sprouting all across the land in response to a collective craving for the aboriginal ways of “sacrifice.” In this thirst for “saints,” even “political parties became the object of apotheoses.”⁷⁰

Politics in the triumphant age of nihilism is an endless exercise in “staging.” For Jünger, democracy, like truth, simply did not exist.⁷¹ He intimated that, as modern citizens, all we have been witnessing are variations in the tyrannical art of command (*die Kunst der Führung*): elections are but disguised plebiscites, and a foregone result must always be presented as “a deafening choir, which arouses terror and admiration at once.” This unstinting endeavor to *produce* political drama requires perforce a corresponding increase in police personnel. The expansion of the latter, Jünger added, triggers, however, a concomitant, counterbalancing “power of the minority.”⁷²

In the gray herds of sheep, wolves lie concealed, which is to say, beings that still know what freedom is. And these wolves are not only themselves very strong, but there also exists the risk that, on a bad day, these might pass on their qualities to the masses, turning them from dumb herds to aggressive packs. This is the nightmare of the rulers.⁷³

In its essentials, this inconclusive account of State intrusion eliciting the “minority’s” counterreaction—the swelling “minority” being driven by a vanguard of technique-hating stalwarts—is identical to Foucault’s “resistance at the margins” and to the interplay of “Empire” and “Multitude” evoked by Hardt and Negri.

Jünger recommended that the latter-day warrior-aristocrats “cross the *line*,” that they step out of the grounds of nihilism. Since frontal, martial resistance against modernity was impossible, the only pursuable form of rebellion left to them would be to transfer the insurgency from the outside to the inside. Which meant that they would have to cultivate, and cloak themselves with, a personalized style of silent combat to be waged daily in the ordinary avenues of life in view of a grand, eventual revolution.

To this new “rebel,” Jünger gave the name of “*Waldgänger*”—roughly translatable as “the one that defects to the woods.” The appellation immediately calls to mind the figure of the brushwood resistance fighter, the French maquisard.

The “brushwood,” for Jünger, was a symbolic space of *freedom*, which the maquisard re-created “over the line,” as a sacred oasis in the nihilistic desert where the Leviathan of technology could not reach him.⁷⁴ In the bosky solitude, the maquisard could worship in silence his “intangible treasures”: *death* above all,⁷⁵ as well as beauty, “which is always born of a wound,”⁷⁶ and the only two forces that ought to be taken seriously, Dionysus and Aphrodite.⁷⁷

And at this stage, possibly to legitimize this new and intriguing category of the underground forester, Jünger engaged in a bit a tomb raiding, that is, he ransacked the cellars of mythology and scripture in search of tropes with which to inoculate his message. This is indeed a conventional stratagem of persuaders the world over, which, indeed, seems to be perennially encouraged by the sublime disorder that reigns over religious mythology. We shall see that out of such tomb raiding, individuals such as Strauss would make a profitable business.

For his resistance fighter, Jünger improvised a minipantheon crowned by a Christ that is half Hercules (the slayer of idols and founder of cities), half Dionysus (god of the feast and of the serene communion with the dead). As chief hero of the liturgy, Jünger picked Socrates, whose *daimon* he equated symbolically with the brushwood. In a bout of freestyle hermeneutics, Jünger saw in the death of Socrates “one of the greatest events.” It taught men that “the world is built in such a way that prejudices and passions always demand their tribute in blood, and that it is good to know that this will never change.” To think it will is the “stupid” conviction of those obdurate “philistines,” whom “one encounters nowadays on every street corner.”⁷⁸

It is in the nature of man to be destructive as well as creative: his *daimon* wishes it so.⁷⁹

Life was a struggle to Jünger, a struggle against the fear of death, and it was by overcoming this fear that the heroic individual could defeat the State—a State that employs terror, the police, and the ministries of “health”⁸⁰ to reach inside the “divine power” of human resistance. The resistance (*der Widerstand*) of the brushwood rebel had to be “absolute”: he would give no quarter and would stand ready to endure in loneliness the brunt of nihilism’s “satanic” arts.⁸¹ The human being, said Jünger, was trapped “inside a great machine designed to annihilate him,” to “torture” him, and “only a miracle could save him from such a whirl.” But, time and again, he *had* rebelled and broken the chains, “even in prisons, actually there more than anywhere else”; in opposition, man would reveal his “princely demeanor.”⁸² Broaching anew the old theme of “pain,” and anticipating Foucault, yet again, Jünger sang the praise of the “ill man,” the “patient” (*der Kranke*), whom he thought “sovereign” in the face of those “nihilistic consortia of physicians” that make an economics out of his torment. The patient would eventually overcome and “dispense a healing sent by impregnable abodes.”⁸³ He too was in the brushwood.

Jünger believed that only two ways led out of the torture chamber: *crime* or the brushwood. This explained for him the tremendous appeal that the figure of the criminal had been exerting on the collective mind of the West, particularly in times of such utter nihilistic decomposition as ours. And Bataille had voluminously accounted for this phenomenon, as we know. But since criminals and partisans are by nature manipulable, it was imperative that the maquisard differentiated himself from the low-class delinquent as markedly as possible “in point of morality, conduct of the battle and social relationships.” Only the path of the “Waldfänger” allowed the aristocrat to preserve his “sovereignty” on the nihilistic side of “the line.”⁸⁴

So we were left wondering: What sort of vicissitudes a brushwood rebel was bound to experience, and most importantly, what decisions would he have to make? Jünger in 1957 responded with the tale of Richard, a demobilized commander of the cavalry, who found himself recommended for a post of security chief to Zapparoni, the world’s leading hi-tech tycoon. In Foucauldian terms, Zapparoni symbolized power’s ultimate drive: not merely the control of life itself, but the precise replication thereof.

Zapparoni made robots; artificial reproductions of human beings—perfect reproductions, which were cast as characters in a series of film sagas. In the gardens of the tycoon, Richard discovered swarms of artificial, *glass bees* that composed a robotized ecosystem of pellucid box-hives gauged for a competitive extraction of honey.⁸⁵ The spectacle of the glass bees gave way to a horrified hiatus as Richard made out looking through his binoculars heaps of severed ears strewn across the meadows of the estate. Having failed to keep his nerves under control and guess that the ears were artificial ones, Richard did not qualify to become Zapparoni’s chief of security, though he obtained a position in the firm as a steward and arbiter in labor disputes.⁸⁶

The message of the *Glass Bees* was threefold. First, the scale and drift of modern Technique was one of “illusion”⁸⁷ (Zapparoni’s motion-picture empire) as well as one of a constantly impending holocaust (the vision of innumerable

severed organs). Second, whereas Jünger had encouraged man to give in to the murderous machine in 1938, twenty years and a Blaze later, he seemed to caution that aristocrats had better keep clear of the control room of such devilish enterprises. Which did not imply, however—and this is the third, decisive point—that the maquisards should give up power entirely. They should rather stay within the establishment, but in the capacity of, say, councilors or consultants.

How brushwood fighters could unleash the aristocratic revolution from their dispersed posts of corporate consultants was something that Jünger, in the best postmodern tradition, could never explain. But the character of Richard in the panorama of the postmodern Right is nonetheless important in that it foreshadowed the late figure of the “anarch,” which, to a degree, represents the ideal philosophical posture in vogue among the Straussianists.

Echoing Kojève,⁸⁸ Jünger had by 1960 come to the realization that there was no essential difference between the empire of the United States and that of Soviet Russia. The “white” and the “red” stars were twin bodies of the same firmament,⁸⁹ like creatures of nihilism—the former being simply much more efficient in point of industrial throughput and social control than the latter. Not only had World War II eliminated the archaic structure of the State, but, presently, nihilistic empires themselves were fusing into *The World State*, which was Junger’s precursor expression of *Globalization* and the precise analog of Kojève’s “homogeneous and universal State.”

With the attainment of its final magnitude, the State does not only conquer its greatest spatial extension, but also a new quality. Historically, the State ceases to exist. [. . .] Power-related questions are solved.⁹⁰

In short, here we had the classic postmodern conclusion: the End of History, the End of Ideology. In such a framework, Jünger seemed convinced that regular armies fighting conventional wars would become useless, and that, as a result, man was finally presented with the opportunity to “manifest himself in his purity, unshackled by the strictures of organization.”⁹¹ What this meant, however, was not clear: purity in war or purity in peace?

No less hazy was in this connection Jünger’s allusion to our time’s impending “conception of a great maternal image.” Heated talk of patriarchy or matriarchy, and of hearkening to either, was for Jünger, who *knew* these themes, wholly misplaced. Those systems, he asserted, “had an outlook completely different from ours.” The spiritual genius of the World State, said Jünger, would be one that cherishes the “mothers of gods and of men.” And to such a spirit would contribute, without their knowing it, the steadfast labor of logic and the masculine form of knowledge.⁹²

This insight may lend itself to opposing interpretations: it meant either that we have entered an era in which men and women will bring to fruition an alliance built upon nurture and labor-saving inventiveness—which would be ideal—or that humanity is about to witness a renewed coupling of Kali’s appetite for destruction with a profusion of hi-tech implements of mass destruction.

The figure of the “anarch” made its full appearance in *Eumeswil*, Jünger’s last great piece of political fiction. The portrayal of the “anarch” was a new rendition of the brushwood fighter.

The Condor, who ruled *Eumeswil*, a city-State on the horizon of dreams, was a *tyrant*. He and his retinue dominated the city from the ramparts of the citadel, the Casbah. Agitating against the Condor were the tribunes, governors of mob rule. This, however, was not the familiar Jüngerian setting pitting aristocrats against democrats. The Condor himself, as the narrator related, “lived off Leviathan.” He was an old-fashioned despot, who did not abstain from employing technology, oppression, and lies to impose order.⁹³

Gullibility is the norm; it is the credit on which states live: without it even the most modest survival would be impossible. [. . .] Strictly speaking, there are only tyrants today; their methods of padding their cudgels differ only in color, but not in cloth.⁹⁴

The trick in such a game, which saw tyranny as the only solution to our “imperfect and peaceless world,”⁹⁵ was to act like the narrator, the self-styled “anarch” Manuel Venator, a scholar and the Condor’s barman.

The anarchist defines himself vis-à-vis the “anarchist.” The latter is a cross between the “Waldbänder” and the partisan. The anarchist is an impatient utopian, who believes that human nature is unqualifiedly good, and that the world may thus be changed for the better by “wiping out” the monarch—that is, whatever tyrant happens to be in power.⁹⁶ In sum, Jünger thought the anarchist a naïve, chaotic fool. Like, say, St. Paul, but not Christ, who, to Jünger, was the quintessential anarchist.⁹⁷

The partisan wants to change the law, the criminal break it; the anarchist wants neither. He is not for or against the law. [. . .] He recognizes lawfulness but not law. [. . .] [He recognizes] the laws of nature, and he adjusts accordingly.⁹⁸

The anarchist thus can bide his time. Unlike the anarchist, the anarchist does not see himself as the tyrant’s adversary, but as “his antipode,” “his pendant”: he does not fear the monarch, he is his equal.⁹⁹ The anarchist has an ethos, but no morality. “He despises rules” and shows no intention whatsoever to “render thanks”: to paint God as “good” and to abide by His Law is “to castrate” the Lord on one hand and society on the other. “Re-ligio” as “bond” “is precisely what the anarchist rejects.”¹⁰⁰

By thatching this figurative hut of cynical dissidence around one’s soul, Jünger believed that one could thereby render oneself immune, indifferent to the pernicious halo and cruelties of power. Protected by this armor of *désinvolte* disdain, the brushwood fighter could survive in the tyrant’s entourage and retain his invaluable “sovereignty.”

The anarchist has appropriated authority; he is sovereign. He therefore behaves as a neutral power vis-à-vis state and society. He may like, dislike, or be indifferent to whatever occurs in them. That is what determines his conduct; he invests no emotional values.¹⁰¹

Such was, in the end, Jünger's political testament: an invitation to exercise power, without taking it seriously in order to become "free."¹⁰² This appeared to him the only way to survive as aristocrats in the sea of nihilism, which is presently covering the whole earth.

History is dead.¹⁰³

Whether they know it or not, Jünger, exactly like Foucault, suggested that modern men exist today only as *wielders of power*—whether at the top, to the right of the tyrant, whether at the bottom of the bureaucratic hierarchy, or in the side streets of the metropolitan ghettos, as "the minority." All we do is prevaricate and survive. Such is the modern, nihilistic condition. To sustain it with dignity, namely, to retain one's sovereignty, Jünger found exclusive solace in a form of private prayer—Heidegger would call it "care"—to the inscrutable Void.

In *Eumeswil*, the Condor is eventually overthrown by the Tribunes and vanishes in a hunting expedition along with his retinue, including the narrator. It looks as though Jünger was saying that in the postmodern game, nothing really mattered anymore; that history was finished, that the State had gone global, and that power was everywhere. As Venator, he had made his decision: to live by and die with the aristocratic variant of tyranny. Postmodern, yes, but of the Right.

In conclusion, Jünger sketched a universe that is by and large a richer synthesis of Bataille's sociology and Foucault's Power/Knowledge. The ingredients are the same: the cult of death, the eulogy of pain, the discernment of Technique as a spiritual force radiating "power," the worship of the Void as the headless issue of a divine presence dispensing growth and the holocaust, the scorn of compassion, and the rebellious pose of the anarch. Politically, Foucault is a perfect embodiment of a Left-wing anarch: an establishment intellectual mingling with anarchists and the lunatic fringe. Jünger is his geometrical counterpart on the Right: a former Nazi sympathizer, who lived on to be honored by the respective presidents of France and Germany in the global era. Bataille's undecided position between the two, as said, is the epitome of the "postmodern condition," which is truly neither of the Right nor of the Left, but is merely a creed of uncompassionate Nothingness.

Jünger was an individual with a divine hand, an icy, perceptive soul, and a rotten spirit. His experience sets the standard against which all the recent ideology of domination and tyranny that has come out of the American establishment ought to be gauged. We shall see that, as far as the Straussianists are concerned, the points of convergence are unmistakable and poignant.

Martin the Obscure

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), an icon of postmodernism, told a tale of Gnosis that differed little from Bataille's. The "similarity" between the two authors has already been acknowledged by the late exponents of the Frankfurt School, a handful of whose founders did attend Bataille's *Collège de sociologie*.¹⁰⁴ Unlike

Bataille, however, Heidegger had little of the theorist in him. He was exclusively a mythmaker, who drank from the fount of Gnosis, and what he achieved, in fact, was to ladle those tales of old into modern caskets. Therefore, seeking an ingress into Heidegger's forbidding writing is best effected by focusing on his treatment of mythical sources. One may then grasp how a whole system of thought could be erected thereupon. In this connection, a particular fragment of myth related by the Latin author Hyginus, which Heidegger cited in his magnum opus, *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*), affords an insight into his modus operandi.

The myth is that of the deity, Cura ("Care"), who fashioned man out of clay (herself a goddess, Tellus), animating him with a spirit provided by Jupiter. While body and spirit were to be surrendered to their makers at death, Care was entrusted with the stewardship of man while he lived: such was the judgment of Saturn.¹⁰⁵ In the hands of Heidegger, Cura was sublimated into a misty metaphysical entity called *Da-sein*—the "being-there," which roughly corresponded to a congeries of what the practitioners of spiritual science call eons, archangels. Eons are the spirit-guides of peoples. And Care/*Da-sein* could be seen as a willing, self-contained spiritual manifestation of the human race. Heidegger wanted to know what brought us to the world, what made us be what we are in this strange cosmos. But, more specifically, he wanted to address these questions *not* by having recourse to the traditional regression to God, whom he disbelieved. And so he envisioned humans as partaking of this existential organism, the *Da-sein*, which appeared to be itself on a quest to know what it really was.

What we designate as, say, politics, ethics, powers, and history were for Heidegger the "vicissitudes of *Da-sein*"—that is, the worldly expression of our being there. To Heidegger, these earthly, tormented records of our being there were the living proof that some intuitively aboriginal, *wholesome* way of being had presently found itself "trapped," "ensnared" in the world, as it were. Ensnared in a world of alienation, malaise, and inauthenticity. In brief, the nihilistic age, which is "incurable" (*das Heil-lose*).¹⁰⁶ Heidegger said that we were being "thrown," stranded in the world, and this image of the existential shipwreck was through and through one of Gnosis, with which the German philosopher was conversant as he had devoted a course to the topic in 1921. So the task before the individual was one of "de-struction" of the contemporary nihilistic "tradition," in view of unveiling his own true essence. One had to hark back, not to God, but to the Being—that is, to an understanding of the nature of this nurturing spirit in which we live before it had "fallen prey" to the ways of modernity. One had to "return."

This process of reapprehending the authentic nature of our being, Heidegger called "existence"; it is Bataille's tragic living: it is that path the traversing of which was going to present man with the deepest mysteries of life.

What did Heidegger finally apprehend on the road of "existence"? He understood that discourse, which he referred to as "logos," proceeded linearly, leaving much "buried" and "camouflaged," and that underneath the curtain of speech, which was the soundtrack of existence, there lay the Nothing (*die Nichtung*).

And the “genuine” nothing itself—isn’t this that camouflaged but absurd concept of a nothing that is?¹⁰⁷

For man, this revelation occurred in a state of *Angst*. Bataille had likewise witnessed that the unveiling of the Void was unfailingly announced by a vertiginous seizure of “angoisse” (the French for *Angst*, anxiety). Heidegger described *Angst* as a state of “bewildered calm,” which “robs us of our speech.” Therefore, he concluded that it was “in nothingness” that we find ourselves “thrown.” And this *inexpressible* mood of forfeiture before the “uncanniness” of our being alive—which is itself a tale of “silence”—climaxes in our taking conscience of our *death*.

The nothingness primordially dominating in the being of *Da-sein* is revealed to it in authentic, being-toward-death.¹⁰⁸

“Care” then resurfaced in Heidegger’s system as a therapy whereby man could be driven back to his “essence.” By exercising care, Heidegger thought that we might have recuperated the sense of archaic genuineness—in things such as “the hammering” of the smith, “the north wind, the woodpecker tapping, the crackling fire.”¹⁰⁹ Of such purity was made the “heritage” of a people, and only “destiny” would bring the people in “being-with-one another” in the fold of “community.”¹¹⁰

What followed from such a nurturing surrender to the beckon of “being” was indeed a rapport of Power/Knowledge. This peculiar relation to a rediscovered *Da-sein* allowed the latter to speak through us, and not us through it; we *knew* through it, now that existentially we had recognized ourselves as “lieutenants of the nothing.” This was a further refinement that would be explicitly adopted by Foucault, whereas Heidegger’s equivalent of Bataille’s *Acéphale* was the metaphor of “the clearing” (*die Lichtung*). The “clearing” was the space of life whose extension was delimited, and whose clime was determined, by an historical *joint-process of concealment and disclosure* through which the opposite modes of Being (light and darkness) revealed, intermittently and *tragically*, that there existed Nothing beyond it. This re-elaboration of the Gnostic “God that is not,” which avows its nothingness in the interplay of flashes and shadows, would in turn inspire deconstructivism’s toying with traces and shrouded meanings.

Heidegger made “creative” use of classic sources to “support” his refitting of Gnosis. He made himself, in this sense, the headmaster of postmodern tomb raiding, and the labor of interpretative slaughter to which he subjected the pre-Socratics has remained famous. Kojève and, in particular, Strauss, would be awed and forever marked by such philological abracadabra. As a poignant example, consider how Heidegger would extort *Da-sein* from the fragments of Heraclitus. The point of departure would be Fragment no. 16: “How would one escape the notice of that which never sets?” Now, converting “that which never sets” into “that which always rises” yields the verb *phynai* (to live, to rise), which is not in Heraclitus, though the cognate word *physis* (nature) is. In fact, Fragment no. 123 says: “Nature loves to hide herself,” which, playing again on *phynai*, Heidegger rendered as “the emergence (from concealment) favors the concealment.” To

justify further the initial substitution—of “always rises” for “never sets”—Heidegger sought in Heraclitus another word “related” to the verb “to live.” He found it in “ever-living,” which appears in Fragment no. 30: “<The ordered?> world, the same for all, no god or man made, but it always was, is, and will be, an *ever-living fire*.” “Ever-living” here seemed to introduce the word “fire,” which Heidegger read as the “(sacrificial) fire of *enlightenment*,” *das Lichten* in German. And since the latter derives from the same root as “the clearing” (*die Lichtung*), it followed that Fragment no. 16 could finally be translated as: “How could someone remain hidden from it, that is, from the clearing?”¹¹¹

Which for Heidegger undoubtedly meant that men and gods, in their mutual relation to the “fire” of the world,” found themselves forever present in the opening of the clearing, all of them being sometimes revealed by light, and sometimes ensconced by shadows as harbingers of forthcoming revelations.

Heraclitus, is known as the “obscure one” (*o skoteinόs*). And so would he be in future, Heidegger concluded, “because he thought, questioning ‘the clearing.’”

Then, of course, there had to be some political, pragmatic resolution to all such speculation, and, as known, it found expression in the surmise that Hitler and his movement might incarnate just the fateful, communal “return” to a pure *Da-sein* that Heidegger had longed for. After all, all Nazi “theologians” has likewise spoken of Germany in terms of a gem encrusted in the dross of the “Jewish,” “liberal” spirit.¹¹²

On May 27, 1933, as Nazi Chancellor of the University of Fribourg, Heidegger delivered the infamous *Rektoratsrede* (the chancellor’s address) that marked an intriguing conjunction of the Western philosophical tradition with the “will” of Nazism’s exceptional advent. Heidegger announced expectantly “the spiritual mission of the German people,” which would see to it that “science and the German destiny accede together to power.”¹¹³

Interestingly, most allocutions Heidegger would pronounce in his ten months of militancy would make constant reference to the powers of mobilization of the “German worker,” seen as that genuine striker of the aboriginal “hammer.” The sociological insight was admittedly borrowed from Jünger’s essay on the “total mobilization” and from his ambivalent tract on “the worker” of 1932. Heidegger, who held seminars on both works, would make explicit mention of Jünger in a November 1933 speech.¹¹⁴ *The Worker* was an ambivalent tract because Jünger, who at heart felt no attraction to the new reality of Germany’s toiling swarms, had clearly hailed these as heroic agents with a view to riding Germany’s promising Nazi-fascist onslaught against the Weimar Republic.¹¹⁵

But when Hitler took power, Jünger, as said, withdrew cunningly, while Heidegger didn’t. He acted like a fool, said Jünger years later, thinking something new was budding on the horizon. This went to show, Jünger concluded, that Heidegger’s vision was not as clear as his.¹¹⁶

Though Jünger did not hold Heidegger’s Nazi militancy against him, Heidegger’s postmodern admirers, from Lyotard¹¹⁷ to Strauss,¹¹⁸ would always express their greatest dismay at “the slip” of the neo-Gnostic master. Sorriest of all was Heidegger himself: *mein Irrtum*, my error, would he say lamenting those

“ten months” as Nazi Chancellor. But they forgave him. His was a unique case in this regard.

His Western partisans slapped Heidegger on the wrist, and have gone on to this day to republish, retranslate, and regloss his work galore. Jünger had seen farther, but he was too dangerous. Heidegger, on the other hand, was so obscure that one could say of his texts everything and its very opposite, and a convenient academic stalemate would allow his legacy to pass on undisturbed.

More to the point, Heidegger was still needed in the West. Revered by the French postmodern Left, he was needed in an uncompassionate Americanizing West, which had emerged from the war hungering ever more for an antihumanist “new idiom”¹¹⁹—something “sophisticated” by which to articulate that foul, innermost desire of our age: and that is, to prove that goodness is not a principle that may triumph.

Kojève: The Pierre Menard of Postmodernism

The link between postmodernism’s Left and Right factions, as set out in the introduction to this chapter, has been correctly traced to Kojève (1902–1968)—Bataille’s teacher and Strauss’s companion—whose insights constitute some sort of shared space between the extremes.

Peculiar to Kojève was his “style.”

Jorge Luis Borges had once written a short piece of fiction about an author, Pierre Menard, who, three centuries after its original composition, had resolved, madly, to “create” anew, word for word, fragments of Cervantes’s *Quixote*. The ironic subtlety of the tale was the suggestion that the *same* sentence “composed” centuries later could acquire an altogether different, ominous signification: some triviality in the 1600s could have suddenly struck the modern reader as, say, “Nietzschean.” The original functioned thus as a “palimpsest”: words that could *arbitrarily* convey a myriad of ideas.¹²⁰

It turned out that Borges’s piece was no fictional experiment at all but rather some uncanny mockery of perfected schemes of tomb raiding such as that performed on Hegel by Kojève in the thirties, and on the classics by Strauss during the following two decades.

Alexander Vladimirovitch Kojevnikov was Wassily Kandinsky’s nephew; he had settled in Paris in 1926 and changed his name to Alexandre Kojève. There, at the invitation of fellow Russian émigré and philosopher, Alexandre Koyré, he lectured at the École Pratique des Hautes Études from 1933 to 1939 on the philosophy of Hegel.

For six years, a small, but extremely significant group of initiates sat at Kojève’s feet. [. . .] For Bataille, each encounter with Kojève left him “broken, crushed, killed ten times over: suffocated and nailed down.”¹²¹

Kojève had read Hegel several times “without understanding a word.”¹²² But, then, most likely inspired by Heidegger, whom he considered a “genius

philosopher,”¹²³ he hit upon the idea of rereciting Hegel’s narrative, almost verbatim. By being selective, and artfully laying the stress on particular passages, he managed to retell, not Hegel’s, but postmodernism’s same old myth.

According to Kojève, man had issued from the Void; how, Kojève was not able to express intelligibly. But thereafter the game of life had begun. What drove it was “a desire for recognition”: he assumed that men vied with one another for supremacy, violently. “Without this struggle to the death for prestige,” Kojève lectured, “there would have never been human beings on earth.”¹²⁴ The strife would perforce end in the establishment of masters and slaves. Man saw in man a hostile animal that had to be overcome—subdued but not killed, or else the victor would not have been able to elicit from his beaten opponent the awe and respect that was presently due to a sovereign master. The masters were masters and “free” because they had “risked their life.” And as a result, they came to form a kept class, that is, a class fed and supported by the drudgery of the servant multitude. But when the conquest had ended and there stood but one master facing one slave, the sovereign *warrior* could take no pride in the cowering recognition that the slave accorded him. The master could engage death no longer. It followed that the only party that could tolerate existence, the only one that could live a “satisfied” life was the slave himself, not his lord.

History, therefore, was the progress of the slave. It was the narration of his liberation from the fear of death. The slave kept death at bay by toiling; by developing “technique,” which conserved life, he strove toward emancipating himself from the master.¹²⁵ The slave’s agonizing travail to escape death composed an existential drama whose only possible egresses were work, “madness and crime”: work alone allowed the slave to overcome the anxiety (“angoisse”) of what appeared to him a senseless and unbearable existence in the hostile realm of the master. Hence the unfolding of industrial affluence, of “progress.”¹²⁶ In this drive to break away from the clutches of earthly serfdom, *in time*, the slave gave himself over to God, as a Christian: still a servant, but of a *divine* master. And when the last of feudalism’s warrior-lords departed, history begot the “bourgeois,” who, at heart, was a “masterless slave.” We had entered the modern era. Finally, when the bourgeois became fully a “man of reason,” his Christianity became wholly superfluous, as creatures of mere reason are by definition “essentially irreligious and atheistic.”¹²⁷

By 1800 the transformation was complete. The occasion of tyranny dissolved as the new modern State configured itself as a stable, immutable social organism. Pseudomasters without slaves (the aristocracy), and pseudoslaves without masters (the bourgeois), all of them trusting in God, had given way to the undifferentiated mass of the modern “citizens.” The citizens were the synthesis of masters and slaves: they were at once soldiers that worked and workers that soldiered. Leaders and tyrants were themselves but (bigger) wheels in the clockwork. This “total” and “definitive” reality assumed the appellation of “universal and homogeneous State.” It was the mechanized hive, in which the “discourse” of men turned into “the language of bees.” In such a State, change and revolution were therefore impossible; the State would forever remain identical to itself: the End

of History.¹²⁸ Likewise gifts, love, and charity had become meaningless for their possibility was exclusivity predicated on inequality, that is on the benevolence that the master had the prerogative of bestowing upon inferiors.¹²⁹ The Sadean senselessness of the gift is here found in a formulation whose imprint on Bataille is obvious.

Who, in the universal State, would be the heirs to the master-warriors of yore, whom Kojève so passionately admired?¹³⁰ The “wise men,” or what Kojève, borrowing the tag from Hegel, designated as the “men-of-the-*Weltlauf*”—that is, the sages that take the flow in their stride.

The man-of-the-*Weltlauf*, the one that accepts the course of things and acts upon it, is free vis-à-vis the order which he realizes and from which he profits; he may sacrifice everything to this order, all ideology and even his life. He is a Master. [. . .] He is always victorious against the man-of-virtue whose ideology never modifies the course of History. [. . .] The sage contents himself with understanding.¹³¹

Bataille’s heterogeneity of the slave and of the master is obviously derived from these lectures. Adverting years later to Kojève’s “End of History,” Bataille commented that “the End of History is the *death* of man proper.” Bataille envisioned the end of history as a truth “as good as any, an established truth.” And in such a movement, the only manner men had to preserve their sense of being human was to nurture “the differences that separate them from one another.”¹³²

The End of History and the providential constitution of the Universal State is one of postmodernism’s articles of faith. So far, the Left has clung to it with jubilant conviction¹³³—after all, this Homogeneous State was the authentic precursor of “globalization”:¹³⁴

What we now begin to feel, therefore—and what begins to emerge as some deeper and more fundamental constitution of postmodernity itself [. . .]—is that henceforth, when everything now submits to the perpetual change of fashion and media image, nothing can change any longer. This is the sense of [Kojève’s] revival of [the] “End of History.” [. . .]¹³⁵

“Overpowered” by Kojève’s apocalyptic representation of “this ingenious tyranny,” which “operates primarily in the mind,” postmoderns have since come to doubt that it can ever be subverted. Having lost faith in the force of rebellion, “they romanticize the act of sabotage.”¹³⁶ In this connection, Heidegger in 1955 had politely implied to Jünger that the “crossing of the line” the latter was recommending was, in fact, make-believe.¹³⁷ Hence the conception of the anarch, which Kojève had fully developed on his own, with the of man-of-the-*Weltlauf*. Indeed, Kojève’s “Menardian” retranscription of Hegel appeared to produce a serigraph of Jünger’s complete sketches: we encounter once more the story of death-loving knights driven to extinction by the burgesses’ handicraft. It is the story then of a bourgeois revolution succeeded by a techno-industrial flood of insect-like soldiers-toilers that speak the discourse of bees in a World/Universal State whose reality only a vanguard of “anarchic” sages can acknowledge.

What Kojève did during the Nazi occupation of France is not known. In the Cold War era, he re-emerged as an active bureaucrat within the newly established European Community, bent on doing his share of midwifery for the Universal State. Throughout this time, he was suspected of being a Soviet spy.¹³⁸

Like Jünger and Heidegger,¹³⁹ Kojève made no qualitative distinction between the United States and the USSR: both were manifestations of the universal, homogenizing process toward “animalization” of social organization. To him, America was the epitome of “posthistorical,” brutish satisfaction in a world of abundance. In 1948 he predicted that the United States, the more efficient of the two rivals, would win the Cold War by relying on economics alone, and that China would soon join the fray. Bataille, too, had foreseen that much in 1946.¹⁴⁰

Kojève indulged his nostalgia for the lost arts of the master-warrior by visiting Japan, whose samurai practice of *seppuku*—“a perfectly ‘gratuitous’ *suicide*”—he understood as an expression of “snobbery” (a variation on Jünger’s *désinvolture*). Snobbery was thus for Kojève the only mode of behavior available to anarchists like himself in a time of nihilistic downfall.

The postmodern depiction of our collective life as that of an “unerotic”¹⁴¹—so would Jünger say—computerized outfit seems far more truthful than Liberalism’s portrayal of society as an atomized mass of confident individuals expressing their liberties on the market. The central untruthfulness of Kojève’s account, however, was its *modern*, conventional hypothesis that men in their raw constitution affirm themselves only by way of brutal emulation; that recognition can only be achieved through violence. No less false is therefore the contention that “brotherly love,” as professed by Christianity, was an invention born out of the original weakness of the slave. What was peculiar to Christianity was its tenet of “non-resistance” (turning the other cheek): *that* was a trait corroborated by habitual subjugation, as during the Roman Empire. But according to the anthropological record, brotherly love is an “elemental trait of [our] species,” at whose expense a reversion to barbarous prevarication and emulation—that is, “sovereignty”—may gain ground.¹⁴² This is to say that even though the advent of the Universal State may be a reality, one that is still riven by a tremendous expenditure of barbarous violence (not just mechanized destruction), there is hope that this dismal homogenizing development, with its wars, poverty, and environmental ravages, may be contrasted and defeated precisely by appealing to our innate instinct of mutual succor.

Leo the Squalid

PROMOTHEUS: It’s all over with Zeus.

PESEITAIRUS: All over? Since When?

Aristophanes, *Birds*¹⁴³

The hubbub with Leo Strauss (1899–1973) seemed to have begun in November 1994 after the Republicans won control of the House of Representatives for the first time since 1952. In the run-up to the elections, the Republicans’ main cast,

which counted several Straussians, had performed the conspicuous gimmick of lacing the conservative talk with homiletical fervor; the stress on religious values this time had been exceptionally marked. The “religious” swerve of the Grand Old Party had alarmed the Liberal media, and *The New York Times*, in partisan style, had launched a campaign against the putative inspiration of all such pious, and (in the *Times*’ view) the retrograde commotion: it arraigned Leo Strauss as the “godfather” of the Republicans’ bigoted victory at the polls.

The maneuver of the *Times* has ever since laid the groundwork for the belief that the influence of Strauss was causing a dramatic shift in policy and undermining democracy in America. But this is not true. It happened that, in general, the *type* of propagandist that came to fit the agenda of a faction with urgent bellicose business was that of an intellectual with a Straussian pedigree. Thinkers do not shape policy (posthumously); they rather *reveal*, in part, the ideological color of the party that has chosen to employ the jargon developed by them.

The Straussians reemerged in the Cabinet of Bush II (2001). When September 11 came, the presumption was rekindled that the ensuing War on Terror, with its disinformation, crusading sound bites, and (mostly Arab) death, was, again, the legacy of Strauss. It was rekindled by the Democrat camp in an effort to demonize its Republican rivals by insinuating that they were under the sway of an undemocratic, obscurantist guru. However, the imputation of Strauss’s post mortem guilt was predicated on tenuous grounds: in most anti-Bush media production that made mention of Neoconservatism, the charge was often raised that the second war in Iraq (March 2003) was essentially Strauss’s posthumous deed. The philosopher was accused because Paul Wolfowitz, who was instrumental in launching the war as no. 2 of the Pentagon at the time, had been a student at Chicago of Strauss’s most famous disciple, Allan Bloom.

Clearly, a major exaggeration was afoot here.

Devout Straussians such as the academic Francis Fukuyama, whose books can always rely on an enormous amount of establishment support, have come to the fore to denounce all such insistence on Strauss thirty years after his death as “careless” and “silly.”¹⁴⁴ Strauss’s devotees deny their master’s spiritual wrongdoing and aver that his exceptional “sophistication” and purely speculative concerns place him above policy-related squabbles, and thus above the slander of his late detractors.

Even so, the fact remains that the Straussians “are there.”¹⁴⁵ They share power in Washington, as chief publicists of the regime. Their numbers in the academy are perceived by their critics to be “staggering”; and it is indubitable that these Straussian professors have so far done precious little to counter convincingly the pervasive critiques to which their avatar has been subjected, no matter how careless or silly they might find them.

To repeat, Strauss’s involvement in the contemporary debate merely reflects the exigency to boost the truculence of public discourse on the part of a regime eager, unlike its predecessors, to effect momentous change (i.e., conquest) in record time. And as such, as a peculiar development in the speech of the ruling empire at a critical time, Strauss’s impact is worthy of examination—all the more

so as his testimony, as first evinced by a leading derogator of Neoconservatism, counts indeed as a relevant instance “of rabid, radical, [and] nihilistic . . . postmodernism.”¹⁴⁶ The case of Strauss is not without fascination. “Abstruse”¹⁴⁷ and “less-than-transparent,” Strauss came to be surrounded by “uncritical adulators,”¹⁴⁸ whose worship earned him, on the other hand, the status of “one of the most hated men in the English-speaking academic world.”¹⁴⁹ What appeared to be a “sphinx without a secret”¹⁵⁰ had in the thick of confidentiality created a “cult” of sorts between master and disciples. And it is to the dissemination of his message by such disciples rather than the works themselves that Strauss seems to owe his notoriety.¹⁵¹

Strauss came to America by way of England in the early thirties to flee Hitler’s Germany. He would teach in the United States, mostly at the University of Chicago, till the late sixties. Methodologically, his lares were Heidegger and Kojève.

[The] philosophical respect [Strauss and Kojève had] for each other was unbounded. On reading Kojève’s *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, Strauss immediately ranked it as the most brilliant case for modern thought since Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, though without, he added, “Heidegger’s cowardly vagueness.”¹⁵²

Heidegger had disfigured, distorted, and rearranged, and Kojève had selectively regurgitated. Borrowing something from both, Strauss was going to *paraphrase*, which is to imply that he had no “style” worth speaking of. As to his vaunted “mastery” of the classics, it cut an abject figure if stacked against the monumental achievements of Germany’s Wilhelmine school of philology. Strauss’s technique, or lack thereof, consisted of unpalatable summaries of classic texts, which through interstitial commentary, aided by a process of ad hoc shadowing, emphasis, and suppression—not unlike Heidegger’s—were going to yield the customary postmodern adventure of Void, violence, and masters and slaves.

The reader has to add and to subtract from [the speeches] in order to lay hold of [the] teaching. The addition and subtraction is not left to the reader’s arbitrary decision. It is guided by the author’s indications. . . . Nevertheless a certain ambiguity remains.¹⁵³

As he put it, Strauss “dimmed the lights,” and affecting an air of deep mystery, he whispered that “today *the* truth may be accessible only through certain old books.” “Intelligent and trustworthy readers only” could read “between the lines” and decode formidable secrets that the ancients had encrypted to elude “capital punishment.”¹⁵⁴ Though the path connecting a tenured professorship at the University of Chicago to the scaffold was not exactly a straightforward one, Strauss saw nonetheless himself fulfilling a similar prophetic “duty.” Simply, it was that America’s politically correct speech, with its deistic overtones and professed faith in democracy, could make no allowance for an outspoken celebration

of injustice, oligarchy, and mendacity. Which were Strauss's tenets, as we shall see. He thought occasionally of using numerological vaudeville as a clever teaser.

The *Prince* consists of twenty-six chapters. Twenty-six is the numerical value of the letters of the sacred name of God in Hebrew. [. . .] But did Machiavelli know this?¹⁵⁵

Acting the part of the hieratic Kabbalist, he tried to sell the reader on the notion that his books, like the Bible, had two layers of meaning: an exoteric, popular shell for the common mortal, and the esoteric nectar for philosophic supermen like himself, Kojève & co. Strauss was going to daze us with "the art of revealing by not revealing and of not revealing by revealing."¹⁵⁶

Nothing exemplifies Strauss's bogus hermeneutics better than his manipulation of Aristophanes's play, *The Clouds*. The main tension of the plot revolves around the school of Socrates, the "Thinkpot, where for a fee one can learn to prove that right is wrong."¹⁵⁷ Thoroughly unhistorical,¹⁵⁸ the Socrates paraded by Aristophanes on stage is a highbrow mountebank preconizing a bizarre trinitarian cult of Void (chaos), aboriginal Ether (the clouds), and Discourse.¹⁵⁹ Discourse is impersonated by two characters: the Just Speech and the Unjust Speech. The former is the romantic account of a golden age (once upon a time when men were upright), the latter typifies instead the late, callous talk of the fashionably unjust, lascivious, unfaithful, and self-seeking majority. Haranguing the audience via the Unjust Speech, Aristophanes—a disgruntled nostalgic at heart—reckoned everybody, from the poor to the rich, an "assfuck."¹⁶⁰ *The Clouds* unravels as a youngster, empowered by Socrates's rhetorical instrumentation, reaches by logical deduction the conclusion that there might not be anything wrong with beating up his own mother—Strauss interpolated, God knows how, that the youth was thus led to the possibility of "incest."¹⁶¹ Horrified by the indoctrination his son has received in the Thinkpot, the father of the youth sets the Socratic academy on fire. The master and the pupils escape.

Strauss was enthralled by Aristophanes's Socrates, who taught rhetorical artifice, "debunked justice," and contemplated the triad of Void-Ether-Discourse.¹⁶² Of great attraction to him were the sectarian rapport in the academy tying the master to his "fellow students,"¹⁶³ as well as the Unjust Speech, which Strauss saw as "the self-destruction of justice supported by the gods."¹⁶⁴ In the final analysis, for Strauss this meant that humanity was, in fact, a pool of "ignorant" "assfucks," to whom the true philosopher was in "no obligation."¹⁶⁵ This "unjust" world of competition, greed, pertiness, and prevarication was *the* world, as ordained by the "gods"—that is, by *Nature*. It was to Strauss a natural, immutable reality.

The state of nature is intolerable. [. . .] Philosophy recognizes that nature is *the* authority.¹⁶⁶

The Just Speech, instead, embodied in his view "ancestral opinion,"¹⁶⁷ in other words, it was that sublimated *idea of justice* that made up the stuff of traditional

religious dogma. Religious dogma, which Strauss thought was entirely *artificial*—that is, “invented” by poets, legislators, and tragedians in order to make collective life tolerable in the face of violent chaos, which was the original condition of existence.¹⁶⁸ This was the inexpressible truth, intelligible only for “those who know,” “wholly unconcerned” thinkers such as Socrates, whose iconoclastic discourse held in regard neither the city nor the family (viz. indifference toward incest, or even toward “human sacrifice”¹⁶⁹), neither legality nor justice.¹⁷⁰

Nothing is sacred for Socrates because nothing can withstand his *logos*.¹⁷¹

The true Straussian sage had to agree with the bluntness of the Unjust Speech, though he was to keep his elitist distance from the rat race of the majority. His task was to debunk the unnaturalness of the Just Speech (i.e., the naïve belief that “God” existed, and that it was a good and just principle), even though in public he had to uphold it, *cautiously*. For, “caution,” Strauss sentenced, “is a kind of noble fear”: certain “extremely relevant facts” had better remain hush-hush not “to inflame popular passion.”¹⁷² Strauss thought that it was because Socrates had been *imprudent*—in going, say, as far as to suggest openly that nothing natural barred the consummation of incest—that the Clouds punished him. It followed for him that the true just speech was neither the Just nor the Unjust one, but rather that of the Clouds, with its creed in Void-Ether-Discourse: it alone captured the true “nature of man.”¹⁷³ In sum, Chaos was the primal condition of being. Discourse composed the tension between the unjust law of nature and the man-made code of laws. And the vapors of the ether, as in Heidegger’s clearing, dispensed care and revelation by way of disclosure/concealment, in the form of “salutary untruths”¹⁷⁴ both to the unknowing folk and to its gentlemanly, yet no less ignorant, oligarchs.

In synthesis, to Strauss, Heidegger’s great merit was to have shaken modern consciousness out of a state of obliviousness: men had been forgetful of “*the fundamental abyss*.”¹⁷⁵ Forgetful that they lived “in every respect in an unwalled city, in an infinite universe in which nothing that man can love can be eternal.”¹⁷⁶ There lay *nothing* beyond this cosmos, whose natural elements—the Gods—were but “disturbers of order.”¹⁷⁷ The “Gods” brought upon humanity misery, strife and plagues, and to Strauss such disasters were “as much a work of nature as procreation.” “The movement from Venus to nature, which is destructive as it is creative,” is, in the end “an ascent.”¹⁷⁸

These were epigrams Bataille or Jünger could have themselves drafted. The truth of nature was therefore a “repulsive truth,” which men instinctively mimicked day-to-day in their pursuit of “gain,” and which was a vindication of “tyranny,”¹⁷⁹ because the desire to profit was ultimately a drive to prevaricate, to overwhelm others. Yet, for the sake of political stability, men invented order and fashioned it into “law,” the “infinite variability” of which was the mark of its human contrivance.¹⁸⁰ All the pantheons of the world, the legislative codes, and the divine epics were thus a collection of “beautiful falsehoods.”¹⁸¹ Likewise, Jünger thought that “vagueness, imprecision are not falsehoods.” “But,” he added,

"if an utterance begins with a lie, so that it has to be propped up by more and more lies, eventually the structure collapses. Hence [his] suspicion that Creation itself began with a lie."¹⁸²

Justice was a mirage, or better, it was itself "bad" and "ineffectual,"¹⁸³ for it did not mirror the verity of nature: namely, that "the wise man seeks only his own good, not the other man's good."¹⁸⁴ Everybody "loved" money, Strauss winked, not "justice as such."¹⁸⁵ "The man who is truly just," Strauss finally deduced, can only be "unwise or a fool—a man duped by convention."¹⁸⁶

In his *Laws*, Plato had recommended telling youths, "for their good," the "useful fiction" that a just life was more pleasurable than an unjust one: materially speaking, it is seldom true, of course, but a pedagogical imperative demanded that young citizens be thus encouraged.¹⁸⁷ Strauss interpreted this notorious passage to mean that the philosophic gazers of the Void had to enshroud the repulsive truth with "noble lies" and "untrue stories [for] little children but also for the grown up citizens of the good city."¹⁸⁸

Doubtless, Strauss was convinced that men could only lead their life sleep-walking, oblivious, that is, to the "cataclysm": denying "the initial (and final) terror" was the sine qua non for "felicity."¹⁸⁹ Hadn't Jünger aphorized that "there are forms of deception (*Täuschung*) without which man could not live: if one were to shout the truth at him, one would make him fall down like a sleepwalker"?¹⁹⁰

Of all the classics, not surprisingly, Strauss favored Machiavelli: none appeared to have "the grandeur of his vision." Yes, Strauss conceded, the teaching of the Italian was "diabolical," but one should not have forgotten "the profound theological truth that the devil is a fallen angel."¹⁹¹ In a Kojèvian paraphrase of Machiavelli, Strauss reminded the reader obsessively that behind our righteous liberal democracies there lurked the eternal and ugliest realities of power. Like Bataille,¹⁹² Strauss enjoined to replace the conception of an omniscient God ruling over the cosmos with the notion of life being a game ruled by chance.¹⁹³ Like Jünger, Strauss accused Christianity of having conjured up the idiocy of "hell" and driven the world into "weakness."¹⁹⁴

All religions, including Christianity, are of human, not heavenly origin. The changes of heavenly origin that destroy the memory of things are plagues, hunger, and floods: the heavenly is natural; the supra-natural is human. [. . .] [Machiavelli] indicates that religion can be dispensed with if there is a strong and able monarch. This implies indeed that religion is indispensable in republics.¹⁹⁵

Borges was not jesting: to parrot four hundred years later Machiavelli's lines on the pusillanimity of compassion and on the might of the strongest was going to infuse the replica with an odd "Nietzschean," or better, "fascist" flavor.¹⁹⁶ It was the story of man taking the place of God, all over again, for the abyss had swallowed the divine: Zeus is dead.¹⁹⁷ Since the "most perfect truth" was that might makes right, Strauss rewrote that "very wicked" assassins might aspire to "eternal glory" if they succeeded in establishing a State that catered to "the common good." Clearly, then, "the distinction between virtuous heroes and extremely able criminals [ceased] to exist."¹⁹⁸

The “usefulness” of religion, therefore, was “not altogether negligible”¹⁹⁹ in regimes more or less dependent on the appetites of the mob, as “republics” are. Jünger would have agreed, of course, that in the epoch of nihilism (“liberalism” for Strauss), the “fear of God’s wrath” was a necessary opium, which, among other socially expedient functions, turned natural savages into fathers and patriots.²⁰⁰ Bataille had reasoned along similar lines when he came to the conclusion that angst, that is, “the fear of hell,” contributed in part to “this edifice of magnificence,” which is the Catholic Church; angst to Bataille was in any case “the companion of glory.”²⁰¹

However, where there existed a “ principality”²⁰² of men-gods, possessing a “superhuman” strength (the Socratic “*daimon*,” which is also the “brushwood”),²⁰³ Jünger and Strauss believed that no civic worship was necessary, for the gods were these “masters of the universe” themselves.²⁰⁴ These philosophic aristocrats, said Strauss, were “religious atheists,”²⁰⁵ steeled by a “warrior ethics,”²⁰⁶ who would lord over the multitudes by “subjugating chance,”²⁰⁷ or “by subjugating time,” after having “abjured death within themselves,” as Jünger put it. This required “sovereignty.”²⁰⁸ And what brought these masters together at the pinnacle? War, of course—“the genitor of all things.” All that was true, dynamic and significant of humanity’s trajectory was for Strauss the mileage of a social engine running on war-motion-injustice (as opposed to peace-rest-justice). Ares and Aphrodite, War and Sex (the natural powers of procreation), lived in fundamental “harmony.”²⁰⁹ “War,” Strauss said, “is a ‘violent teacher’: it teaches men not only to act violently but also about violence and therewith about the truth.”²¹⁰

The truth was that war served two purposes: it served the purpose of external conquest—“empire,” which, to Strauss, was not possible without “the full participation” of the rabble in political life.²¹¹ And, “from time to time,” war had the “salutary” function of “uniting society,” that is, of uniting that selfsame rabble to its Godlike rulers.²¹² Then, to lie, to lie and deceive all, became one of power’s imperatives. “For,” as Machiavelli taught, “if deception is laudable and glorious when practiced against foreign enemies, there is no reason that it should not be permissible against actual or potential enemies of the fatherland.”²¹³ Likewise, Bataille—epigone of the postmodern Left—had praised the lie, and he held venom in the tail:

Those who *talk* of action, *talk* about not lying. But those who act, and know how to act, lie insofar as the lie is efficacious. Action is *struggle*, and insofar as there is struggle, there no longer exist limits to the diverse forms of violence; no limit, which is not set by efficacy, is thereby given to mendacity. The alternative way of construing the question is idealistic, and as such it is the veritable leprosy of the soul: it is the inaptitude to look unflinchingly, it is the weakness that deflects the gaze lest it shouldn’t endure.²¹⁴

Confound these “stupid,” “leprous” idealists and “anarchists,” seemed to cry all these postmodern mystagogues: Strauss, like Bataille and Jünger, could not make sense of Apollinian idealism, with its derivative notions of harmony, peace, and compassion: he found it “utterly incredible,” not to say “fantastic.”²¹⁵ More

sensible was rather the conviction that “man’s becoming good [required] that violence be done to him because goodness [was] against his grain and against his nature.”²¹⁶ A nature that for Strauss exhausted itself in “the alternation between virtue and vice.” And of all vices, he found that of rapacity particularly exhilarating:

One must choose the vice of rapacity. Or, if one prefers, one may say that true liberality of the virtue of giving consists in giving away what one has taken from strangers and enemies. [. . .] Justice as the *stable mean* between self-denial or giving away what one has on the one hand and injustice on the other is impossible.²¹⁷

Yet again, from Sade to Strauss, by way of Kojève and Bataille, justice, measure and the gift are found to be an obnoxious impossibility.

Finally, it all boils down to legitimize, by hook and by whatever crook, the necessity of “tyranny.”²¹⁸ Postmodernism, in all hues, is the ideology of tyranny; its pliant articulation, and its illusory bifurcation into antagonistic halves have but added to the sophistication of humanity’s latest brand of authoritarian propaganda.

Out of a little known and uneventful dialogue by Xenophon, in which a poet, Simonides, takes the liberty to advise a despondent tyrant, Hiero, to humor its constituency, Strauss, inspired by Kojève, ended up carving an early specimen of Jünger’s anarch. Strauss thought that by giving counsel to the tyrant, the intellectual Simonides was indeed challenging Hiero’s tenure: he was positing himself vis-à-vis the despot as an equal, who could either himself rule or advise a rival of the incumbent tyrant.²¹⁹ The poet/philosopher, as “teacher of tyrants,” gave proof of his strength by professing no fear “of hell or devil,” as well as a complete indifference toward the criminal means by which the ruler had achieved power. A “freedom from [conventional] morality” conveyed by *silence* attested the philosopher’s sovereignty in the presence of the tyrant. Strauss’s anarch had to be “an utterly unscrupulous man”: like the Socrates of *The Clouds*, he would be “above the law.”²²⁰ Tyranny would therefore be the “necessary,” “absolute” “rule without laws” over “willing subjects.” In other words, guided by the philosopher, the capable king would be the gentleman that would make the laws as he saw fit, corroborating his rule with the selective bestowal of “beneficence” upon the citizens.²²¹

On these premises, Strauss and Kojève came to spar amicably on the fate of tyranny in the modern age. Kojève objected nothing to Strauss’s portrait of the philosopher-anarch, and saw in it the perfect resolution of the will to power in the Universal State. In the immutable order of the homogeneous society, the spiritual descendants of the slave-owning masters would have to don the anarchic vestments of political “advisers” to the ruler, and suggest to him shrewd measures, such as “enfranchising the slaves and emancipating the women.” If he wanted to succeed and act “quickly” “in the political present,” the philosopher-anarch would always find himself “drawn to tyranny.”²²² And so it was with Kojève who played God in the French Ministry of Economics till the end of his days.

Strauss, on the other hand, acknowledged the reign of homogeneity, but had no liking whatsoever for this “modern democracy,” with its “elector apathy,” abominable “mass culture,” and “lack of public spirit.” He found these amorphous box-hives of homogenized glass bees liable to being “appropriated by the meanest capacities without any intellectual and moral effort whatsoever and at a very low monetary cost.” In the medium run, he thus appeared to settle for the Kojèvian solution of ruling these benighted mass cultures behind a façade of semidisguised oligarchism.²²³ But ultimately, Strauss was hoping that, one fine day, the authentic heirs to the knights of yore—“true men” (“*andres*” in Greek) would “revolt against [this universal] state [. . .], in which there [was] no longer a possibility of noble action and great deeds.” The supermen would rebel and plunge anew the world into the tumultuous chaos that used to reign, say, in those times of heroism such as the Bible relates:²²⁴ Strauss wished for a “nihilistic revolution.”²²⁵

In the meantime, interracial and clannish rivalry would, and should, increase the temperature in the Universal State in view of the sovereign, nihilistic fight. In the interim, it was going to be each for his ethnic self, in the name of “kinship”²²⁶ before the insurmountable “multiplicity” of languages.²²⁷ Strauss looked forward to no universal community of men, because a community to him was by nature “exclusive.” He agreed with Heidegger “that the modern project [had] destroyed all ‘peoples’ and left nothing but ‘lonely crowds.’” Only the prohibition of mixed marriages would preserve “venerable ancestral differences”: therein lay for Strauss the power of political Zionism. Addressing an audience of young Jews in 1962, Strauss invited them to treasure their Jewishness, for it would afford them “the opportunity ‘for heroic suffering.’”²²⁸

In sum, it is not difficult to understand why (1) the Liberal establishment has sought to single out Strauss as the bogey responsible for America’s late ugly face and loss of popularity aboard; (2) why the Republican propagandists themselves have been somewhat coy about their relationship with Strauss; and (3) why the exaggeration of Strauss’s importance has fudged the whole perception of the issue at hand. First, Strauss lends himself perfectly to the part of the villain: his work is, properly speaking, rubbish, which conveys nonetheless what the Liberals are very much afraid to admit, namely, that the Kojèvian representation of power is far more realistic than Liberalism’s teleological tale of democracy and human rights. Second, given the obscenity of the creed, which is very (if not universally) diffuse, however, both on the Left and on the Right, it would obviously be bad policy to trumpet these tenets in “Puritan” Anglo-America too often and too explicitly. That is why Jünger is virtually unknown in the English-speaking markets, and why Strauss figures mostly in the footnotes of the Straussian speakers. Finally, the reason why Strauss does not appear in current propaganda as much as one would expect is that the Neocons, as will be argued in the coming section, are, in fact, more Kojèvian than Straussian: they thirst after no “nihilistic revolution,” but are rather much more comfortable advising the tyrant from within the structures of the Homogeneous State. And this, too, is a truth that should be suppressed as much as possible, for Kojève is the link to Bataille, who inspired Foucault, who, in turn, is in the postmodern game the “enemy” of the Right.

Neocon

Most Americans are not merely patriotic; they are nationalistic, too. They do not merely love their country; they believe that its political arrangements [. . .] are superior to most other nations' arrangements. They believe, but are too polite to say [. . .].

George F. Will, *The Slow Undoing, The Assault on, and Underestimation of Nationality*²²⁹

Neoconservatives took shape in the seventies. They allegedly came into being as that half of the middle class that, repulsed by the Luciferian ruckus of the counterculture, stood firmly behind the Vietnam War. Sober Liberals, but America-loving, these new conservatives were trying to interlace in public discourse strands that had theretofore lain scattered: they thought of giving voice to a movement that would be at once pious and patriotic, expansionist, populist, and probusiness, and not hostile to big government. Oddly, no one current of America's biparty articulation carried at that time all such wishes in its flow. Simply said, Neoconservatism embodied the need for a postmodern imperialist party: this was merely the platform for the "total mobilization" in the era of the Homogeneous State.

Their beginnings were modest and peripheral, though a (covert) jump start from the CIA certainly helped to boost the editorial stock of Irving Kristol, one of Neoconservatism's intellectual founders.²³⁰ The movement became more visible through its support to the Reagan administration (1981–88), which upheld the ideals of Neoconservatism: imperial intrigue versus formidable "enemies" (Russia's "evil empire," Nicaragua's Sandinistas and Fundamentalist Iran), frequent appeals to God, large budget deficits earmarked for war, and inveterate oligarchism (tax breaks to the wealthiest). But it was not until the mid-nineties, as said, that Neoconservatism made a name for itself, defining its identity in contrast to the Democrat administration of Bill Clinton. In June 1997, the Neocon clan issued a manifesto of sorts, The Project for the New American Century (PNAC), which called for an uncompromising drive to shape the world in America's image. Among the signatories were politicos such as Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz, and Straussian/Kojèvian academics such as Francis Fukuyama.²³¹ All were expectantly waiting to make it to the top.

Neoconservatism is a peculiar form of oligarchic rhetoric, which accompanies a tightening of the screw in terms of social control in a clime of perceived, all-out warfare: abroad and at home. Neocons were out "to get" "America-haters" wherever they lay.

At home, the enemy, of course, was the Foucauldian multiculturalist. By the late eighties, the new postmodern Left was bulky enough to stand as the Right's target of choice. The (remunerative) task of engaging the mocking varlets into a never-ending postmodern *Kulturmampf* fell to Strauss's protégé Allan Bloom (1926–1992)—successor to his master at Chicago.

Bloom released *The Closing of the American Mind* in 1987. Boosted by exceptional publicity (above all, *The New York Times*), whose fingers appear to be in *all*

pies), this utterly insipid, prolix, and scattered polemic found its way into millions of households and allegedly made its author a millionaire. The success of such a document is a fascinating case and an egregious proof that the establishment, with proper spin, can “sell” whatever it wishes. One wonders what millions of readers could have found in this nearly incomprehensible tract. Nothing was clear except that “the Great Books” were under attack by a horde of multiculturalists, who had been forever reeling from a dreadful indigestion of German philosophy.²³² The Bible, Shakespeare, and Euclid were the good stuff, and MTV was bad: the only passage everybody could remember, of course, was that of the body of “the pubescent child” throbbing in front of the TV “with orgasmic rhythms.” To Bloom, it looked as though Foucault, Madonna, and punk rock had turned life into “a non-stop, commercially prepackaged masturbatory fantasy.”²³³ Thereafter, the book plunged into a numbing and barren excursus on Locke, Rousseau, and Hobbes, flanked by semicoded references to Kojève and Heidegger, whose sole legible beacons were insistent flashes of hard-boiled patriotism: “for us,” “self-interested rational” Americans, Bloom intoned, “freedom and equality,” not “brotherly love or gratitude,” were “the essence” of the country, one of “the wonders” of the world.²³⁴

Postmodernism, the “Parisian fad,” would pass, Bloom hoped, but in the meantime it was wreaking havoc by appealing “to our worst instincts.”²³⁵ The relativists, Strauss had warned, by drawing no distinction between men and brutes, would spell “the victory of the gutter.”²³⁶ In the name of “tradition,” Bloom had fired the opening shot of the great postmodern battle: Shakespeare, Plato, and the Bible were thenceforth appropriated by the Right, and the “Europe-hating” Foucauldians ranged themselves accordingly on the Left. What all those European classics actually meant or were worth had become by this point utterly irrelevant. The war was on. In September 1988 the postmodern armies of Duke University were dispatched to the nearby campus of the University of Southern Carolina, which hosted a conference on the future of Liberal education, to return fire against Bloom’s “dyspeptic attack on the humanities.”²³⁷

The Neocons were wise to the postmodern game. Bloom had challenged his students’ postcolonial infatuation, by placing them before the dilemma encountered by a British administrator during a suttee: would not any good American prevent the widow from being burned by the *savage* custom?²³⁸ Kristol, on the other hand, debunked multiculturalism as a “desperate [. . .] strategy for coping with the educational deficiencies, and associated social pathologies, of young blacks.” Kristol lamented the marauding tactics of “nationalist-racist blacks, radical feminists, [and] ‘gays,’” whose militant advocacy of “minorities,” appeared to him “subordinated to a political program that [was], above all, anti-American and anti-Western.”²³⁹ Of course, while the British administrator that saves the Indian widow from a live cremation forms a neat pro-British vignette, Bloom did not recount, for instance, the ditty of those other British stewards that spent roughly a century butchering the Chinese in order to foist upon them masses of opium. Nor did it cross Kristol’s mind to explain (1) how those “educational deficiencies” of young blacks arose; (2) how Neoconservatism was going to make

good patriots out of those youths; and (3) how multiculturalism could be an anti-American and anti-Western project if this was an outfit manned by full-fledged Americans, who were steeped in the Western tradition and none other.

Then, the Berlin Wall collapsed; the Soviets could play the Cold game no longer. As America's "evil" alter ego, the Soviet regime had fulfilled a most important role, which was presently vacant. Bloom's student Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington came to the rescue. Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* was another exploit of editorial marketing, this time on a global scale. In 1992, when the book appeared, even the Europeans could not escape discussing intensely what appeared to be the final cut of capitalism's triumph over State socialism. The "end of history," as the public came to learn, meant that Western business enterprise had won the Cold War, and that in the future we could not imagine, institutionally speaking, any arrangement surpassing the one in which we presently live. As usual, nobody had taken the trouble to plod through this tedious book; newspapers publicists had summarized it thus. The truth was that the *End of History* was something else.²⁴⁰ It was a transposition of Kojève's tale to the end of the century, at which time, past the failure of Communism, the unbridled diffusion of animalistic contentment confronted each man with his inborn aspiration for heroic "recognition." This world of triumphant Liberalism was allegedly offering no vent to man's "noble rage" (*thymós*). Bloom had extorted from Plato with Straussian violence this notion of "high-spiritedness,"²⁴¹ without which, repeated Fukuyama, there could be no human life proper: it had "a dark side," a will to do violence to others, but it made us great.²⁴² Like, say, Bataille's "sovereignty," Jünger's "*désinvolture*," Foucault's *folie*, or Kojève's "snobbery."²⁴³

Good health and self-satisfaction are *liabilities*. *Thymós* is the side of man that deliberately seeks out struggle and sacrifice.²⁴⁴

Fukuyama's deeper message was that in the post-Cold War Universal State, one had to combine sovereign rage with the homogeneous routine. "For democracy to work," he said, citizens had to "develop a certain irrational thymotic in their political system," for there was "nothing inherently incompatible between nationalism and liberalism." In synthesis: sovereignty, patriotism, and technique. This was again the "post-historical house"²⁴⁵ of mechanical hives, with brutes on one side of the technocratic line and anarcs on the other. There followed the usual denigration of Christianity as "just another slave ideology," and the exultant expectation of "cultural" clashes with Islam.²⁴⁶ Because, to Fukuyama, our contemporary world exhibited a "curious double phenomenon: both the victory of the universal and homogeneous State, and the persistence of peoples."²⁴⁷ There were, in other words, aboriginal forms of hatred among clans that could not be suppressed; thus men could not just "sit at home, congratulating themselves on [. . .] their lack of fanaticism." They had to fight, and the Gulf War of 1991 was a salutary jolt in this direction: democracy and spiritedness all packed in one blow.²⁴⁸ The book ended with typical postmodern, Bataillean

ambiguousness: the author would not say whether today's contented "slave" would be satisfied with his new lot of "VCRs and dishwashers," or wouldn't rather forsake comfort for a "more distant journey."²⁴⁹

A year later, in 1993, Samuel Huntington of Harvard cooked up a similar story about the world being divided into conflicting unbridgeable "civilizations." *Foreign Affairs* published the piece, and relying once more on the customary ballyhoo, Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* became the analytical highlight in the field of international relations for the following decade. Huntington had merely combined Fukuyama's account with traditional British geopolitics—geopolitics whose simple objective has been to fight for the past century chronic wars on strategic areas of the Eurasian continent (the so-called fault-lines) in order to prevent the emergence of powers that could threaten the maritime hegemony of Anglo-America. Divided by creed, tongue, and customs, the planet was collapsed into antagonistic "cultural" blocks. Huntington had in postmodern fashion proceeded to make of European culture, ignorantly and irresponsibly, a unitary patrimony in the name of which strife against "others" ("the West vs. the rest") was not only rightful and legitimate, but also ineluctable. Bataille, too, had sketched "civilization" as a cluster of "autonomous systems, opposed to one another."²⁵⁰ The slated victim for the forthcoming clash of civilizations, after the demise of the Reds was, of course, Islam. "Islam [had] bloody borders." Better still was to view the coming conflict against a "Confucian-Islamic" connection—as China arming, say, Iran; then one could dream of killing two birds with one stone.²⁵¹ The forthcoming clash against Muslims and "entirely nonideological Chinese nationalism" is for Huntington "a fate Americans cannot avoid."²⁵²

Simultaneously, on the home front, "the clash between the multiculturalists and the defenders of Western civilization and of the American creed [was going to be] 'the real clash.'"²⁵³ A "cleft country" would be in no position to repulse foreign hostility. "Americans of all races and ethnicities" therefore had to "reinvigorate" their commitment to a "deeply religious and primarily Christian country" and adhere "to Anglo-Protestant values."²⁵⁴ For Huntington, the essence of an American civil religion would then presuppose "a Supreme Being," as well as the belief that "Americans are God's 'chosen, [. . .] with a divinely sanctioned mission to do good in the world."²⁵⁵

This untruthful, genuinely Straussian, appeal to militant fanaticism was designed to effect what a "merely utilitarian definition of civil loyalty" could not: namely, to make the workers/soldiers of the Universal State "die for their country."²⁵⁶ Huntington's invocation of Christ was no rebuttal of Fukuyama's contempt for the latter: like Jünger and Strauss, the Neocons were inviting the masses to rally to the Churches, and to pray in their starving hearts to an icon of cultural choice, which would appear in the guise of a warrior king, such as the Jesus daily implored by Bush II. A life of aggressive competition on the markets could also be secured under religious seal by advertizing to so-called Protestant values: historically, Protestantism was itself a creature of nationalistic secession (away from Rome), wholly harnessed to a pecuniary conception of life, which equated material success with divine, unfathomable predestination. Luther, too,

was astute. It was one of the merits of Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* to have shown how such devout barbarism could, in a Westerner's mind, cohabit with a keen grasp of numbers and technique, thereby accounting for the remarkably complex social psychology of the modern West. As remarked in the Introductory, Neoconservatism's ideal-typical solution for the "total mobilization"—the cultivation of this computer-savvy, fanaticized citizen of the Liberal/Universal State—was far more ingenious than appeared at first glance. They alone, said the Neocons, had understood the mobilizing power of *devoutness* ("religion," in common parlance).²⁵⁷

Indeed, come September 11, it took them roughly two weeks, after some initial, timid misgivings among the crowds, to polarize the whole public opinion and catapult the majority onto cheering the holy war against "Islam" or "the Arabs." Things, of course, were not that linear (see following chapter): the position of the Arabs was a complicated one, yet the pitch and swiftness of the mobilization achieved on American soil, without due process and a sensible explanation of the event, was simply phenomenal. Who could then doubt that there existed a "clash of civilizations"?

It was done. America had a declared enemy again, and what was better, it wasn't some mangy, circus bear like the Soviet act, but a phantom menace of barbarous but "powerful" Muslim clerics who allegedly moved with stealth in the ducts of "loose networks" before striking at America. The exquisitely Foucauldian image of the "loose networks" had been the guiding concept of an official memoir released under Clinton by the U.S. Department of State in 2000, titled *Patterns of Global Terror*.²⁵⁸ The administration of Bush II snatched it up, and has to this day, by navigating a flood of "information," worked it into a not unremarkable epic.

Thus, with a little help from terror, the Republicans caught their Democrat challengers off guard and stole the show. The Neocons had thought a shameless and ineffective ploy the Democrat practice, initiated by Jimmy Carter,²⁵⁹ to appoint representatives of "minorities" to office.²⁶⁰ But when their turn came, they certainly did not forbear from flaunting the presence of two African-Americans in the executive (Condoleeza Rice and Colin Powell), as well as the "post-war military command in Iraq" by an Arab-American and a Hispanic-American.²⁶¹ To Neocons, it was thrilling, indeed, to think that U.S. Special Forces were fed rations "labeled halal or kosher."²⁶² Clearly, the "clash of civilizations" was never meant in earnest; it was to serve only as the opening spectacle for a mass homogenization of the world—which is the Neocons' true, Kojévian plank. Then, the government, by clever way of the President's wife,²⁶³ sold the bombing and invasion of Afghanistan (October 2001) as a war of Feminist liberation, and the radical crew barely stirred. And finally, the Neocons pulled the rug from under the Democrats' feet by bagging, easily, all the slogans the latter had hitherto monopolized: Neoconservatism, too, could now stand for "human rights, democracy and Liberal principles."²⁶⁴ And for as much as good liberal Democrats were aghast, the public, in the end, did not see any difference between one steward in Washington and the next. They didn't because there wasn't any.

From then on, the landscapes of terror conjured by the official rhetoric were etched in the best postmodern style. As there was a “loose network” of enemies at one end, there had to be a corresponding lack of center at the other: that “nobody [was] really in charge of where the United States [went],”²⁶⁵ or that the world was “too complex” even for those who wished to govern it, became a recurrent bit of “wisdom” both on the Right *and* the Left. All was “danger and “risk.” Robert D. Kaplan, a compiler of travelogues from ravaged countries, who had the ear of the president,²⁶⁶ appeared to have taken charge as the Straussian portraitist of the regime. With considerable hype from the media, naturally, Kaplan proceeded to lay out the novel, postmodern cartography of the twenty-first century. In our “epoch of themeless juxtapositions,” Kaplan wrote, the “grid of nation-states [was being] replaced by a jagged-glass pattern of city-states, shanty-states, nebulous and anarchic regionalisms.”²⁶⁷ In this world, “peace-making [would] become increasingly difficult,” as people [sought] liberation in violence.”²⁶⁸ Wars in a Universal State plagued by confusion and no solutions would no longer be conventional conflicts, but rather installments to a medium-term plan of guerrilla warfare, such as would be elicited by the dogged conspiracy of “loose and shadowy [. . .] Islamic terrorist organizations.”²⁶⁹

Imagine [. . .] a hologram. In this hologram would be overlapping sediments and other identities atop the merely two-dimensional color markings of city-states and the remaining nations, themselves confused in places by shadowy tentacles, hovering overhead, indicating the power of drug cartels, mafias, and private security agencies. *Instead of borders, there would be moving “centers” of power.*²⁷⁰

“Globalization [was] Darwinian,” which was to say that that resources were scarce (Malthusianism, again), and that, after the collapse of Cold War empires, the surviving reality was one of warrior classes, whose cruelty, traveling along the information highways of the Global community, had become far more manifest and “easier to accomplish.”²⁷¹ To survive the nightmares of the hologram, Americans had to “speak Victorian, think Pagan.”²⁷² They should give up their enfeebling Christianity and opt for a pagan ethos of chronic combat, to be waged against this cruel (Muslim) foe under the aegis of “oligarchic” “corporate” powerhouses, which, alone, possessed the know-how to cope with today’s borderless markets and technological complexity. Doubtless, Kaplan concluded, all such “productive anarchy [would] require the supervision of tyrannies—or else there [would] be no justice for anyone.”²⁷³

The Neocons are nothing outlandish; they are reissues of old-school Liberals—the “Elder statesmen” that fought the world wars—in an epoch in which, as all the postmodern masters understood, the historical notion of statehood had gradually dissolved. What the United States is presently pursuing in the world does not essentially differ from Britain’s imperial push until 1945, except for the nature of the social organization enforced through conquest. While the British exported Britain, which also signified industrial slavery, America sees herself imposing less Yankee mores than the hollow forms of

business enterprise and atomized lifestyles. In sum, the Neocons are “aggressive proponents of the Universal Homogeneous State,” who “wish to impose [this flattening] regime upon the entire world and view American military power as the most convenient means to realizing their designs.”²⁷⁴ In this sense, we said it before, rather than Straussian, they are perfect instances of Kojèvian anarchs. Bataille, in a lecture of his *Collège de sociologie*, had admirably foreshadowed, before the war, the spiritual physiognomy of a Neocon regime, which is nothing but a modern expression of “power” in a State of advanced homogenization:

The dominant class is thus taken with an irresistible nostalgia for that *power* which allows to fix the order of things to its own advantage. Thus [this elite] finds itself incapable of reconstituting power by way of the criminal creativity of the sacred forces, being at once too pragmatically self-interested and too cowardly. It thus has recourse to immediate violence, to the constitution of a new force of the military kind, which it associates to whatever subsists of the sacred forces, in particular of the sacred forces directly associated to power like the Homeland (*la patrie*).²⁷⁵

Incapable of rallying the citizenry to the White House through a sacral investiture comparable, say, to an Aztec mass sacrifice, or the Christmas mass at St. Peter’s, contemporary U.S. administrators—many of them, former, “interested” corporate bosses and/or “cowardly” overseers of State-sanctioned sanitized executions—have perforce recourse to the surrogate of the “Fatherland in arms.”²⁷⁶ This is the configuration whereby the bellicose energy of the community is sucked by the center to be thrust outward. The vision is more actual than ever. Bataille’s formidable excerpt presaged the displeasure he would feel after the war for what he took to be Kojève’s treason of the sovereign cause to the privileges of the ministry. Though quietly enfolded in the meshes of modern society, Bataille and Strauss, and, to a less extent, Jünger, longed throughout their lives for revolution; not Kojève, however, nor the Neocons, or Foucault for that matter, whose pesky call to “resist at the margins” has been of late overwhelmingly disobeyed by disaffected followers “too interested” to think that anything else, other than sovereignty, may be obtainable in this world.

The thesis of this study is, first, that postmodernism, broadly defined, has become a type of thought process that the U.S. administration has actively encouraged for at least three decades now, in concert with the private Interests; and, second, that in such a framework there exists no fundamental difference between the political stance of the so-called Right and that of the Left. Both are issued from exactly the same, disquieting roots. The foregoing discussion should leave no doubt as to veracity of these claims. What is even more damning for the whole postmodern enterprise, with its coil of cross-connections, shared beliefs, political role-playing, and overall intellectual corruptness, is its indisputable contiguity with a very special exponent of Nazism like Jünger, whose comprehensive vision was related in this chapter to fill an enormous gap in the history of political thought, and, more urgently, to afford no apologetic egress whatsoever to all the educated citizens in good standing who place themselves in one segment or

the other of the postmodern camp. They will have to take serious responsibility for embracing out of mere opportunism a creed that is born out of rationalist exasperation and whose immediate precept is a thoughtless and truly foolish summons to misanthropy, indifference, and squalid selfishness.

The rout of dissent in America in times of postmodern pervasiveness, and the deeper reasons of the Left's impotence before the Neocon offensive form the topics of the next, and final, chapter.

CHAPTER 9

True Power: The End of Dissent, Iran/Iraq, and the War on Terror

And all the while, being a new nation and of humble antecedents, this American people has ever been quite irritably beset with a felt need of national prestige; which has engendered a bitterly patriotic sentiment and a headlong protestation of national solidarity; such a spirit as will lend itself to all manner of dubious uses in the hands of astute politicians.

Thorstein Veblen, *Absentee Ownership* (1923).¹

In the past century, the American Left has undergone three phases: a Socialist beginning (1900–1950s), the interval of the New Left (1960s), and the postmodern end-of-the-century (1980s–present). On the old continent, the trajectory has been similar, even though Europe's Socialist apparatus held out much longer (until 1990). Overall, the need for a postmodern mood was far less urgent in Europe than it was in America. In any case, the task of the Liberal administration has been to exercise control over the spontaneous forces for change, which are generally expected to drift toward the established Left. Whenever State coercion proved insufficient or simply ineffectual, the government has, far more efficiently, proceeded to co-opt the representatives of these forces. Out of this process was born the “official Left.” In this sense, the institutional work of these “acceptable leftists” cannot be construed as genuinely progressive, for any gains accruing to its credit are truly increments conceded on the negotiating table by the administration itself, which, by definition, is always in charge. The official Left is perforce conservative.

As recounted throughout this narrative, when America came to adopt Foucault, it was, in fact, sealing a season of social turbulence, which had ended with the discomfiture of those universal values of peace and cooperation that had played a (mixed) role in the agitation of the sixties. All things considered, the Left might have missed its chance to become an authentic movement of dissent since it distractingly forsook Thorstein Veblen. Veblen, one of the West's greatest

minds, had composed treatises of political economy, which were works of theoretical art, as well the most uncompromising invectives against the modern Liberal State ever written. These were formidable documents, drafted by a champion of compassion and pacifism, which should have naturally formed the intellectual heritage of a responsible and nonviolent Left. But they were ignored. His vision is here summarily re-proposed to afford volunteers of all stripes the opportunity to reconsider Veblen, and incorporate his works in their plans. Had the Left mined the legacy of this forefather of communal self-governance, it might have made of it a stepping stone to a renewal of confidence in the constructive possibilities of wide-ranging reform. But in the Liberal State there could only be room for a Marxist or Socialist Left; Veblen was thought fit only for lifestyle sarcasm and pie-in-the-sky utopia. The traditional Left, instead, was trustworthy: most importantly, it was a firm believer in the orthodoxy of the gold standard,² and, no less than the capitalist directorate, it wished for the system of business enterprise just as it was; the Euro-Communists were disingenuously proclaiming that tomorrow the machines would belong to the workers.

Thus, since the end of World War II, the energy for reform of the Westerners was diverted into a cheer-leading joust, in which the “progressives” applauded the anticolonialist guerrillas, while their conservative opposites (bourgeois all of them, naturally) supported America, Israel, and “traditional values.” This acrimonious match lasted until the end of the Cold War, at which time, the anti-imperialist Left, which had done a fine job of denouncing the abuses of the aggressing West, but a poor one of siding automatically with any (Communist) leadership that had officially come under “Western attack,” found itself orphaned of the Soviet shadow. Throughout this stage, Red Russia had proclaimed its devotion to the “people’s fight for freedom” around the globe; it was doublespeak, of course, but (half of) the Western public had rolled with it. In the post-Soviet scenario, however, though one could keep on denouncing the misdeeds of imperialist America, there was no “symbolic” counterpower to look up to anymore: the traditional Left lost then half of its luster. Hence the rush on the Right to redefine the tension no longer in terms of North vs. South, or capitalism vs. State socialism, but rather as the resultant of a “clash of civilizations.” In this setting, the professed nonviolence of the old Left, as well as its analyses predicated on Marxist-Leninist stereotypes, proved to be nugatory: middle-class Westerners just could not bring themselves to hail the new Arab rulers and the Islamists. Institutional dissent was coming to an end.

At this break, the postmodernists emerged as the champions of the leftist discourse. Foucault, again, had set the precedent in 1979, when he embarked on his controversial sojourn to Teheran to acclaim the advent of the “Imam” Khomeini. Generally appraised by postmodern admirers as a troublesome gaucherie on the part of Foucault, this was an episode of fundamental significance. It denuded the mercenary nature of the unwritten contract tying the “radical intellectual” to the establishment. As it always is between courtiers and the crown, the essential *do ut des* (a gift with forced reciprocation, so to speak) transacted between power and the scribes of the Left is one of fame and favor in exchange for “oppositional”

propaganda consonant with deep geopolitical strategies. Strategies, whose conception and management lie far beyond the purview of the retainers. On the occasion of the first Gulf War in 1991, which inaugurated the post-Soviet age of clashing cultures, the Foucauldian Jean Baudrillard opened an important chapter of postmodern finessing. By means of catchy allegorical blurbs, he would claim that the war was a “non-event,” a feat of illusion conjured via the TV screen by the spiritual energy (power) of the West, which had sickened through a gradual loss of existential meaning.

In the forum of political construction, the Foucauldians have ever since laid firm hold of the space reserved for the Left. Foucault's epochal mission to Iran and Baudrillard's psycho-virtual toying with Foucauldian myth have set the tone for leftist evangelism during the last quarter of a century. On September 11, 2001—the West's second momentous rendezvous with politics in the Near East after the Gulf War—Baudrillard attempted a sleight of hand in the same vein, portraying terrorism as the West's subconscious nemesis grown out of self-hatred. Understandably, this time the reception on the Anglo-American market was much cooler, although the Foucauldian constructs à la Hardt and Negri more than made up for Baudrillard's Bataillean, and for the authorities, distasteful license. The latter came to typify a minority within the postmodern movement—one that stood to the left of the mainstream Foucauldians such as Hardt and Negri, and to the far left of those postmoderns who, affecting a passionate concern for the fate of women in the Muslim world, have saluted Bush II's War on Terror with enthusiasm. Not to be left out of the game, the patriarchs of the anti-imperialist Left and their late followers have hastily rallied to the debate by accounting for 9/11 in terms of the so-called “Blowback effect.” According to their usual schematics, they suggested that terror was the brutal pay back for decades of imperialistic intrusion.

The perplexing aspect of this entire episode is that, in its essentials, every single explanation offered by the official Left of the *dynamics* of the terrorist act—that is, it being a counterblow to an opening gambit (good or bad, depending on the political positioning of the opinion-maker)—actually coincided with the government's version of events. Ultimately, the show of a Left that has moved on to espouse consensually the theory that enraged Muslims are bent on shaming America by means of terror has been instrumental in removing one of the last obstacles to the launch of warfare against an undeclared enemy. Five years hence, the results are before everyone's eyes: ravages in Afghanistan, tens of thousands of civilians killed, most of them in Iraq, whose previous regime had been admittedly uninvolved in 9/11, and no appreciable effort on the part of the government to apprehend the alleged masterminds of the attack, let alone to suspend all hostilities before the truth might have been ascertained in a court of law, as mandated by the U.S. Constitution.

Ever since the killing in the “Muslim zone” began, the anti-imperialists and most Foucauldians have advocated peace, but their plea has amounted to little, and it came too late. By refusing to question the rationale for terror and reprisal when the ashes were still smoldering, and by contenting themselves with issuing

“analyses” that matched governmental communiq  s, these official leftists had in fact openly renounced their duty to justice, and peace, they had renounced to dissent.

Much of the Left, [which] derived from the sixties generation, remains an anomaly living on college campuses on memory. [. . .] A Left without power is familiar and perhaps a defining characteristic of its historical predicament; a Left without knowledge loses its excuse for being.³

This chapter opens with a brief excursus on the failure of the Left, seen from the Veblenian perspective. Next comes a section devoted to Foucault’s experience in Iran at the time of the downfall of the shah, which is followed by Baudrillard’s approach and treatment of the intrigue in Iraq. An overview of the leftist debate surrounding the War on Terror completes our discussion of the postmodern imprint on American politics.

Veblen’s Testament and the End of Dissent

The current situation in America is by way of being something of a psychiatric clinic.

Thorstein Veblen, *Dementia Praecox*⁴

It is now a truism that the so-called Left is *dead*.

Our contemporary history books remember essentially two periods during which a visible movement of dissent within Western society rose against the established order: the aftermath of World War I and the sixties. Both pangs of revolt, in their beginning, appear genuine; how they came to be derailed or perverted, neutralized, and suppressed by the authorities is another (important) story. But something like the original spirit of protest that animated both events appears to many, on this day, irrecoverable.

The significant difference between “then” (especially the late nineteen-tens, which saw the campaigning of Socialist leader Eugene Debs in America) and “now” seems to have been the Left’s appeal to the universal value of cooperation, whose virtue is that of engendering union across divides. This is an essential binding factor, which today seems virtually dissolved. A quarter of a century of postmodern habituation—in academia, at school, and in the workplace—has so managed to corrode and break the sentiment of togetherness that such a bond appears, with every passing day, ever more beyond repair. This phenomenon is conspicuous in the United States, less so in Europe, in which nonetheless similar forces are at work—given, indeed, that postmodernism is through and through a European construct.

Had the Left been Veblenian, it might have been immune to the rigid, and unfulfilled, schematisms of Marxism, which fed those absurd partisan rivalries played out in the Cold War. And more to the point, a Veblenian Left would have been impermeable to the uncomppassionate sophistries of postmodernism. It is

with a view to resuming the labor of critique on the Left against misconceptions and damning compromises that we here relate an overview of Veblen's final reflections on the diseased state of modern society, and on the possible means by which to cure it.

Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929) had been an exceptional witness, and also a peripheral actor, of America's last fires of revolt in the aftermath of World War I. Originally, repulsed as he had been by Imperial Germany, he had stood behind the Allied effort during the conflict. But noticing thereafter that the Anglo-American commonwealth had intrigued at Versailles to perpetuate the state of war, he had, like many American radicals at the time, turned his back on the West and hailed the advent of Bolshevik Russia. Lenin had described the latter as Soviets (Councils) + electricity, and Veblen took him at his word. City-States of masterless men, directed by councils of technicians in a world without business, conspicuous waste, and salesmanship, was all Veblen was hoping to see emerge for the sake of human well-being. This, of course, was a vision of communal and pacific anarchism, which had nothing to share with Bolshevism: indeed, Lenin had appropriated and perverted the anarchistic notion of "soviet" for his own totalitarian ends.⁵ A true dissenter and an "alienated intellectual," Veblen, however, "remained aloof from politics"; his radical critique of society would never be incorporated into the radical politics of the Left.⁶

When Eugene Debs was giving American socialism a good name, and proving in 1918 that there might be more heroism in resisting war than in hailing it; when the International Workers of the World struck in 1919; and when the folk and the conscientious objectors manifested here and there a pervicacious resolve not to surrender to the schizophrenic "distemper" and "headlong intolerance" of patriotism, Veblen took heart. But he sank thereafter in a state of bottomless despondency as he saw the police forces, abetted by mobs of "Detective Agencies," victoriously beat the uprisings into submission. By the early twenties it was all over; it had been a biennium of passion. To remember it and to put the last, embittered word on the subject, Veblen wrote his final volume, *Absentee Ownership*, in 1923—this would be a testament of sorts. One that contemporary dissenters should urgently revisit.

Veblen, too, had understood that nationhood was finished. He saw clearly that "national frontiers no longer [divided] anything but national groups of special interests." And that these "national frontiers [were clearly] useful to these special interests," which proceeded with "feverish urgency" "to foment national animosity" with a view to extending their reach by means of forthcoming clashes.⁷ Instrumental to this fomentation of dissension was the cross fire of Socialist and anti-Socialist slogans, which had already become "obsolete in face of the new alignment of economic forces" prevailing at the turn of the twentieth century. "The red line of cleavage," Veblen countered, "runs not between those who own something and those who own nothing . . . , but between those who own more than they personally can use and those who have urgent use for more than they own."⁸ But violence and propaganda were not sufficient to exercise power if the spirit of the underlying population had not been itself the target of a persistent

process of sentimental molding, so to speak. It was in the field of collective psychology that lay the true power of Veblen's analysis. An antioligarchic analysis of hegemonic force that, unlike Marx's, was not fixated on economic factors but on spiritual ones, and that, unlike Foucault's, was actually truthful rather than fictional. Veblen accounted admirably for that process of "autointoxication" whereby the instinctive awe that the average citizen feels before the powerful brings the latter to convince himself that the wealth accruing to the leaders rests on some proper and sovereign right. A right that the citizen may claim for himself in his drive to share the sheen of power. Power in the modern era Veblen called "absentee ownership": this is a claim to wealth, to the labor of others exercised in *absentia*—that is, a systematic exaction of rents, of a free unearned income, perpetrated behind the anonymous façade of the banking and financial networks.⁹ Jünger had said that "the deep and ineradicable instinct of men is monarchic,"¹⁰ and it was precisely against this barbarous pulsion, which presently compelled men "to scramble to get something for nothing,"¹¹ that Veblen waged his idealist fight.

The scramble to make one's dollars work in the bank "at the cost of the underlying population" was coupled with "patriotic devotion to the national establishment." Which came, in effect

to much the same thing as partisan devotion to the fortunes of some particular gang or clique of political hucksters whose concern it is to make use of the national establishment for the profit of some particular group of special business interests. [. . .] When national inflation is compounded with business enterprise [. . .], the product is that *democratic "imperialism"* that is now carrying on the ancient traffic of statecraft.¹²

This is a compelling observation of a system that has remained identical to itself for the last century, and a prescient testimony of the rhetoric that would also become the trademark of the Neocons—themselves referred to as "democratic imperialists."¹³ Veblen found the American people "very credulous about anything that is said and done in the name of business," and their "sentimental deference to the sagacity of business men [. . .] profound and alert."¹⁴ Within this mindset, the "illusions of national solidarity" have brought the "loyal American taxpayers" to believe that their remittances to Washington would benefit them in some "occult way, —in some obscure way which no loyal citizen should inquire too closely."¹⁵

And the taxpayers faithfully pay the public cost of armaments [. . .] by use of which their absentee owners are enabled to increase their private gain. Indeed, on occasion the same local taxpayers have been known gladly and proudly to risk life and limb in defense of [. . .] trade that "follows the flag." Should any undistinguished citizen [. . .] hesitate to throw his life and substance [. . .] for the greater glory of the flag [. . .], he becomes a "slacker." [. . .] Born in iniquity and conceived in sin, the spirit of nationalism has never ceased to bend human institutions to the service of dissension and distress. In its material effects it is altogether the most sinister as well as the most imbecile of all those institutional encumbrances

that have come down of the old order. The national mob-mind of vanity, fear, hate, contempt and servility still continues to make the loyal citizen a convenient tool in the hands of the Adversary, whether these sentiments cluster about the anointed person of a sovereign or about the magic name of the Republic.¹⁶

To Veblen, the nationalist animus and “business expediency,” which he deprecated as an “alien” dimension of the economic realm,¹⁷ were the spiritual drives responsible for what he called the American plan or policy, namely, the “settled practice of converting all public wealth to private gain on a plan of legalized seizure.”¹⁸ Veblen was exasperated by the fecklessness of the “great unions,” which had begun to treat membership the way the captains of industry dealt with production: curtailing deliberately the output (membership), through strikes and lockouts, in order to shore up perquisites and wages. Overall, masters and foremen seemed agreed that “what may be a suitable livelihood for the workman” was best left to the decision of “the substantial citizens.” In other words, both parties concurred that “the workmen should work for a living and the owner-employer should invest for a profit.” It hadn’t crossed anybody’s mind, Veblen interjected, that the solution might just be the converse of such a proposition, to wit, that “the owner-employers should invest for a living and the workmen should work for a profit; leaving the workmen to fix on a suitable livelihood for the employer-owners.”¹⁹ To turn the latter vision into a feasible project one had to revolutionize the structure governing the “several systems” of Christendom. There were three such apparatuses: the mechanical system of industry; the credit and price system; and the national establishment. Veblen construed the nation as a predatory and dynastic relic, which had been revamped by the Interests of absentee ownership into the Liberal State by means of democratic and parliamentary institutions. The credit system, instead, is the ever more sophisticated institution engineered by the absentee elite to regulate the transfer of wealth from the laboring population to the high spheres of decision making.²⁰ Such a system functions as a parasitical appanage, which encroaches upon every single capillary of the industrial apparatus. This technical stock was for Veblen the unique and treasured source of wealth of the community, and therefore its exclusive property. He thus perceived the current economic situation to be “drawn on lines of a two-sided division of its forces or elements: –the Interests; and the underlying population.”²¹

To wrest the technological patrimony away from business and bureaucratic control, Veblen saw in the future no alternative but “to take this businesslike arrangement to pieces and put the works together again on some other plan for better or worse.”²² One had to look for the “self-made though reluctant abdication”²³ of the elite, who should have pacifically dispossessed itself of its financial titles of wealth. Thereafter Veblen would have exhorted all “those shudderingly sanguine persons” to undergo the “critical adventure,” which should have hopefully led to the formation of “soviets of technicians.”²⁴ The “spirit of teamwork” animating these councils of physicists and engineers, at last freed from the shackles of Big Science and of the corporate ethos, should have been counted on to ensure “an equitable distribution of the consumable output.” Platonic philosopher-kings, yet again.

"The main lines of subsidiary preparation" for such an adventure were to be (1) "an extensive campaign of inquiry and publicity, such as [would] bring the underlying population to a reasonable understanding of what this is all about"; and (2) the working out of a "a solidarity of sentiment between the technicians and the working force engaged in transportation and the greater underlying industries of the system."²⁵

So, in defense of the people's well-being, Veblen stood defiantly against a highly *centralized* structure of command tenanted by barbarous and parasitical overlords, whom he sought to see replaced by teams of compassionate and competent scientists dedicated to justice and equality: no absentee ownership, no dictatorship of the proletariat, and least of all no Foucauldian all-encompassing power magma shot through with jets of "minority" rage. *This* should have been a platform of a workable Left.

Of course, Veblen had qualms. His "councils" seemed "at the most a remote contingency."²⁶ To this day, the "scientists" have shown no inclination whatsoever to pursue a "revolutionary diversion," kept as they have been on the tight leash of their "hired-man's loyalty."²⁷ Veblen had forecast this much. In light of that credulous frame of mind and the reverence for business, both of which incapacitate the critical faculty of the average citizen, Veblen resignedly understood that an abdication of the Vested Interests, accompanied by a shift in popular apprehension, was something to hope for only after "an appreciable lapse of time."²⁸ A lonely, disillusioned man, he died in August 1929, a few weeks before the first serious collapse, which he had foreseen,²⁹ of the system he so abhorred. It had been his wish that, in case of death, no effigy or monument be set up to his memory in any place at any time.³⁰ Yet, it would certainly be a shame if today all reformist movements pursuing peace, the protection of the environment, the flourishing of local economies in antagonism to globalized corporate chain-outlets, and the introduction of regional currencies were to forget to hoist his very effigy on their banners. The legacy of Veblen is necessary in our time more than it ever was to understand truly, as he said, "what this is all about," and change thereby things for the better.

But Veblen was an anarchist, a daydreamer, and, in the realm of power, as Jünger taught and Foucault lived to prove, only anarchists truly prosper. The Left dismissed Veblen altogether and confined him to an undeserved oblivion from which he still has not fully emerged. There could be no room for him in the myth-making arena of the Liberal governments—Liberal governments that much preferred to engage the Marxists, whose "metadiscourse" was, in fact, much like that of the Liberals themselves. While the modern Liberals blamed social disorder on an "anti-Liberal conspiracy" perpetrated by the nationalist agrarians and, above all, the Socialist trade unions, the Marxists countered that the emancipation of the working masses was hindered, instead, by an antiproletarian conspiracy fomented by the industrialists' imperialism and the agrarians' chauvinism.³¹ In fact, they were both reasoning around the exact same economic myth, while taking opposite sides. In respect of power, money, and progress, they

all thought alike. Upholding similar “truths,” the “enemies” thus arrayed themselves along the constitutional arc: Liberals to the Right and Socialists to the Left.

A leftist in good standing would have thought that the Great Depression would have been the propitious occasion for world revolution. But, again, the Western “masses” barely budged. Least of all those of America, which remained, barring a few exceptions in the early thirties, eerily tame throughout that grim interlude.³² In fact, what the government held in store for eleven million of jobless individuals, was a second world war, which these would fight with no less ardor than the first.

When Germany was finally dispatched in 1945, the game of nations changed yet again, and this time it reverted to a simple bipolar organization, in which the pro-Communist “opposition” to the Liberal State was curbed in standard fashion by relegating it to preestablished role-playing of “the antagonist on the Left.” This tacit arrangement reflected the far superior power of the United States vis-à-vis the USSR throughout the duration of the Cold game: the cleaving of Eurasia had never been the Russians’ idea. The arrangement was palpable, for instance, in the Marxist posture of Western Europe’s Communist parties up to the fall of the Berlin Wall. These parties were in large part financed by Moscow.³³ They brought some benefits to the working classes, but, as a well established rule, they were *never* to aspire to any true position of command. They shared power for the sake of sharing, in the capacity of token opponents, and nothing more. Any foolhardy attempt on the part of native political forces to stray from the “agreement” would generally meet the corrective joint sabotage of the CIA and the KGB.³⁴ These parties of the Left also afforded a platform and a shelter to all those more or less ambitious upper-class anarchs that fancied to taste power in the guise of “radicals” and latter-day enlightened tribunes. For instance, the intellectual’s semimandatory militancy in the PCF (France’s Communist party—also a KGB pawn), which was undertaken with varying degrees of conviction by many late postmodern exponents including Foucault, is a notable trait of the power theatrics in Cold War Europe.

The rebellious flames of the late sixties—at a time when the postwar boom had exhausted itself and an authentic desire for change had arisen—were put down in Europe by means of conventional repression and State-organized terror, the so-called strategy of tension (the arming and fitting of subversive Left- and Right-wing nuclei by the Services, domestic and foreign), of which Italy and Germany bear the most vivid memories. In America, the elites, such as the Morgan trust, had likewise “[infiltrated] the Left-wing political movements” since the time of the post-World War I disorders.³⁵

This was relatively easy to do, since these groups were starved for funds and eager for a voice to reach the people. Wall Street supplied both. The purpose was not to destroy, dominate or take over, but was really threefold: (1) to keep informed about the thinking of Left-wing [. . .] groups; (2) to provide them with a mouthpiece so that they could “blow off steam,” and (3) to have a final veto on their publicity and possibly on their actions, if they ever went “radical.”³⁶

The logistic contiguity of the establishment to the Left helps to explain the particular landscape of change, spin, and control that took shape in America during the sixties on the occasion of its two defining moments: the civil rights movement and the protest against the Vietnam War. The regime's exigency to rein in the resentment that was beginning to seethe amongst the blacks of the South culminated in Martin Luther King's March on Washington in the summer of 1963. Stewards of the Kennedy administration were pleased to comment that the President had successfully "moved to incorporate the Negro revolution into the Democratic coalition."³⁷ On the other hand, speaking for the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X denounced the event as a "circus." It appeared, indeed, that the government had defused the "anger" out of the march, preventing it from "going radical." The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination, was designed to encourage hiring on the basis of ability and qualifications, not race or religion. But according to Samuel Huntington, as soon as the Civil Rights Act was passed, black leaders, presuming that blacks as a group would still suffer under a meritocratic regime enforced by whites, began to agitate for racial quotas. Ever distrustful of the U.S. administration, these leaders "stopped demanding rights in common to all American citizens and instead began demanding governmental programs to provide material benefits to blacks as a distinct racial group."³⁸ In this sense, the Supreme Court interpreted the Voting Rights Act of 1969 "to mandate systems of representation that would insure the election of minority candidates."³⁹

The turn in favor of racial quotas became manifest in the Spring of 1966, when civil rights activists demanded, for instance, that there be African-American principals in schools offering "Afro-centric" curricula.⁴⁰ This tendency had its origins in the institutionalized fragmentation of society along racial lines advocated by the Nation of Islam, which sought to turn the black neighborhood into a Chinatown—a racially segregated microcosm within the wider American society.⁴¹ All of a sudden, elitist philanthropists, such as those acting behind the Ford Foundation, started to release tens of millions of dollars⁴² for the launch of multiculturalism in the name of "community control."⁴³ The dollar manna from on high soon led to a ferocious competition among "minority" contestants for scarce positions and resources. To the detriment of integration, and exacerbating the growing fixation for "identity," the rival "groups" sought to outbid one another in attempting to win the palm of "victimization."⁴⁴ The pattern was set when the Nation of Islam relativized the importance of the extermination of the European Jews by the Nazis, by bringing the focus on slavery.⁴⁵ At this time, in the late sixties, after having fought side by side in the civil rights movement, American Jews and blacks parted ways. Allegedly, "each side [felt] wounded and victimized, and each demanded a recognition of its special pain and suffering before agreeing to define a new relationship."⁴⁶ From the Jewish side, "racial preferences" were too reminiscent of "anti-Semitic quotas," and the awareness of being a "highly-educated and successful group representing less than 3 percent of the population" would not bring this group to agree to a sharing of the spoils "along ethnic lines."⁴⁷ Since then, all clans vying in this "macabre competition"⁴⁸

have been looking askance at one another, each brandishing its own holocaust as a weapon and an argument settler: Gorea, Wounded Knee, Auschwitz . . . This politics of acrimony was so successful in disrupting the lower and middle classes that in 1972 even President Nixon endorsed legislation on ethnic groups and “allegedly encouraged affirmative action in employment to promote conflict between blacks and working-class whites within the Democratic Party.”⁴⁹

No less successful was the U.S. government when it definitely smashed the black protest by cornering its last representatives, the Black Panthers. How it was that of all the forces existing within the black movement, its symbolic direction passed into the hands of these extremists is something of a puzzle. The post-modern scene made its debut when the conductor of the New York Philharmonic, Leonard Bernstein, became fond of playing flamboyant host to the Panthers in much-gossiped cocktail parties: the expression “radical-chic” came then into vogue. The Panthers were united by a cohesive vision, which stemmed in part from Malcolm X’s segregationist plan, and which looked forward to building solidarity in the community and education projects. Yet their leaders were far too gun-prone, refractory, and intransigent to have been the genuine expression of dissent among American blacks as a whole. Jünger would have doubtless categorized them as “partisans.” The Panthers’ fashionable killing of “pigs” and their semi-hallucinated talk of “overturning the government of the United States” were rather ideal material for weakening the Left and for the maneuvering of the FBI. The Bureau had a relatively easy time, infiltrating, dividing, incarcerating, and murdering the whole lot. By 1970 it was done.⁵⁰

The coming and going of the Black Panthers on the front of the civil rights movement coincided with the rise and fall of the Weather Underground on the front of white, antiwar “New Left.” The so-called New Left had emerged in the early sixties as a modernized movement of dissent—in principle independent from, if not hostile to, Soviet Russia⁵¹—which was supposed to incarnate the progressive aspirations of the American middle class. It “was one of the great surprises of the mid-twentieth century.”⁵² However, the vanguard of the New Left, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), came itself under the leadership of partisans such as Tom Hayden, who, since 1965, seemed far more bent on provoking riots than on constructing a lucid understanding of the crisis in Vietnam and at home. Hayden could also avail himself of the protection of his friend, the then Attorney-General Robert Kennedy. Starting in 1962, the SDS became the recipient of large emoluments from the Ford Foundation. And the Rockefellers, too, were supporters of the New Left, whose publications they financed.⁵³ What was peculiar in this affair was the synchronized effort on the part of the World Communists to patronize these selfsame partisans of the American Left, including the Panthers,⁵⁴ by giving them shelter or by receiving them with fanfare on propagandistic tours of the “revolutionary outposts” from Havana to Pyongyang, by way of Algiers, Bratislava, Moscow, and Hanoi. The trip to Hanoi during the Vietnam War of Hayden and his wife, the actress Jane Fonda, made up a memorable frame of this odd reel. Equally intriguing was the odyssey of the black activist Robert Franklin Williams, an advocate of violence for self-defense.

Forced to flee the United States because of trumped up charges, Williams flew to Cuba, where in 1961 Fidel Castro allowed him the space for inflammatory radio broadcasts. In 1966 Williams was received with pomp in Beijing, as Mao's guest, before being repatriated in 1969 by the U.S. government and the CIA, which were looking forward to casting him as America's new black leader after the assassination of Martin Luther King and the rout of the Black Panthers. Williams chose instead to take a up a post of sinologist at the University of Michigan, where for a year he would brief Henry Kissinger's aides on the dime of the Ford Foundation.⁵⁵

When in January 1968 Castro convened in Havana the great "Cultural Congress," which featured a contingent of 470 intellectuals from Europe, Africa, Latin America, and Asia, the world witnessed the inauguration of the clamorous season of so-called *gauchisme*, that is, of the "Leftism" that would become so fashionable and ingrained in a good half of the Western bourgeoisie. The show also spotlighted a group of Palestinian representatives on the eve of that long decade of Arab nationalist terrorism, which has been of late recycled as "Islamic." So the Cold game thenceforth offered two built-in options to the Western opinion-reader: he or she could either be an anti-imperialist leftist, rooting for Ho Chi Minh and the Vietcong, Castro and Che Guevara, Palestinian fedayeen and the USSR, or a conservative, cheering for America, Israel, and Liberal democracy. *Tertium non datur.* Through a nebulous sequence of maneuvers, which paralleled not accidentally the ascent of the Panthers, the SDS was overtaken by its maximalist fringe, which embodied in pure form the New Left's "aversion to universal principles."⁵⁶ This was a splinter formation calling itself the Weathermen (after a Bob Dylan song), which, starting in 1968–69, came to advocate cop killing, the uncompromising subversion of "Amerika," and consequently a revolutionary alliance with the Black Panthers. Along with other terrorist formations from all over the world, the Weathermen were taught insurgency tactics in the training camps of Cuba,⁵⁷ whose intelligence apparatus was then an outpost of the KGB.⁵⁸ In late 1969, at the time when the State had begun suppressing the Panthers forcibly and the bulk of America's nonviolent antiwar protesters by means of the courts (through trial time and litigation costs),⁵⁹ the Weathermen changed strategy. Driven underground by self-styled "monomaniacal" leaders determined to destroy "the mother country,"⁶⁰ the organization engaged in a long campaign of bombings, which included targets such as the Pentagon and the U.S. Capitol. How such a meager faction could carry on such a campaign with impunity for nearly a decade is a mystery. What appears certain, however, is that the Weathermen, like the Panthers, were infiltrated by *agents provocateurs* of the FBI.⁶¹ This circumstance would explain the authorities' noninterference as an expedient wherewith to monitor the organization so long as the counterwork of discrediting the Left, from which the Weathermen had issued, would be considered accomplished. Seemingly, this came to pass in the mid-seventies: the war in Vietnam had been lost, and the antiwar movement had also been defeated in the process. The way the wind was blowing became evident to the Weathermen

themselves as they shifted the emphasis of their late pronouncements from the evils of imperialism to those of “male supremacy.”⁶² The jig was up. Mark Rudd, their leader, surrendered in 1977—the same year of the American launch of Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*. In 1981, two other leading exponents of the Weathermen—Bernardine Dohrn and her husband Bill Ayers—turned themselves in, to become a decade later, respectively, Associate Professor of Law at Northwestern University and Distinguished Professor of Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago.⁶³

All that was left of the nonviolent Left, after having been overwhelmed by the fantastic machinations of the Cold War and of its anarchists and partisans, was a slew of “single-issue groups,” the most important of which were the women’s and the gay and lesbian movements. “The hope of a Left based in universal principles that had raised its head in the early sixties was dead and buried.”⁶⁴ The survivors of the New Left have since then retreated to the university campuses, from where they had originally emerged, forming in time the “strange anomaly” of “a radical enclave in a conservative environment.”⁶⁵ Some thought that no one “could have anticipated the eagerness with which former protesting graduate students later accepted positions at the very institutions they said were responsible for racism, imperialism, fascism, sexism, and other evils of ‘liberalism.’”⁶⁶ As a former SDS spokesman put it, “While the Right was occupying the heights of the political system [. . .], the Left was marching on the English department. [. . .] We squandered the politics, but won the textbooks [. . .]: ‘political-correctness’ was [our] consolation prize.”⁶⁷ Meantime, it was by grace of affirmative action that feminism—the late success story of the Academic Lef—as well as multiculturalism, were able to assert themselves.⁶⁸ Neither would have existed but for the pressure exercised by the judicial system on the institutions of higher learning. All of such programs were in the final analysis creations of conservatism.

On campus, the chant had changed from “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh,” to “Hey, hey, ho, ho, western culture’s got to go.”⁶⁹ The eighties had arrived, and the postmodern mood set in. By the time Foucault had landed in America, the Left had long been moribund. This tale has thus come full circle by reaching that very historical juncture at which the French antihumanists were imported by the American intelligentsia. Per se, postmodernism represented no epochal, life-changing shock; it was a fancy, academic fixative that came to be employed in the late seventies to clinch a state of near-complete fragmentation. A state that was the legacy of a decadelong effort on the part of the American government to disrupt and neutralize the ferment for change that had arisen in the early sixties. In the end, what postmodernism has shown to have contributed so far has been an outstanding capacity to aggravate a situation that was already compromised.

But before he boarded the plane to San Francisco, Foucault, ever the trailblazer, had previously flown to Iran, in the course of a subtle propagandistic operation that constitutes a special, yet remarkable, precursor to the politics and opinion making in the post-Soviet, postmodern age.

Mr. Foucault Goes to Teheran

“Fuck the Shah.”⁷⁰

Jimmy Carter, 39th President of the United States,
and Nobel Peace Laureate (2002)

When the West endeavored to depose the shah of Iran in 1977–78, the mass media solicited the contribution of several intellectuals including Foucault. Part of this maneuver consisted in casting a fanatic as a “democratic” alternative to the shah. Identifying, choosing, and dressing partisans for the purpose of political intrigue are a standard specialty of a country’s intelligence service. Miles Copeland, a former mastermind of the CIA, revealed in his invaluable *The Game of Nations* a few tricks of the trade for recruiting fanatics.

A ‘fanatic’ [. . .] is anyone who abnegates himself and who will go to any lengths, regardless of harm to self, in the interest of the cause. He is a loser by definition, but he is an important weapon in the hands of the determined non-fanatic—one who intends to *live* for the cause, in other words. [. . .] The nonsense [the fanatics] talk can be polished up so that it not only makes a modicum of sense, but seems to be on a high moral plane. [. . .] There is also the advantage of easy availability. In any country where frustration is general there are bound to be fanatics, or latent fanatics, just waiting to be awakened by the right messiah. [. . .] They are beautifully expendable.⁷¹

While conventional theory offers no conceptual tools to make sense of such a programmatic statement, the sociology of Bataille and Jünger readily explains it: at work is the typical manipulation of the “partisan” by the tyrant (or “butor,” to use Bataille’s expression). The former, being a creature of “the gutter,” is readier to espouse death than the latter, who uses the death wish of the rabble to conserve or extend his power—he “intends to live.” It is in this particular context that one must study Foucault’s encounter with Khomeini’s “revolution” in the late summer of 1978.

As known, a joint operation conducted by the intelligence services of America and Britain had unseated Nationalist leader Mossadegh and reinstated the shah in 1953. The Soviets had watched from the sidelines, as the Anglo-Americans, thanks to a masterful coup, had gone on to repossess the oil wells that had been temporarily nationalized by Mossadegh. During a gala thrown by the shah to celebrate his own restoration, the king had raised a glass to Kermit (“Kim”) Roosevelt, a grandson of Theodore, and the CIA’s chief officer of the Iranian putsch: “I owe my throne,” he declaimed, “to God, my people, my army—and to you!”⁷² He was a “weak king,” and he knew it;⁷³ but he tried to forget to have been yet another Middle Eastern pawn by dreaming. He fancied he could redeem himself by fashioning a modern Persian empire. He ended up using the rents of petroleum to create a two-tier country—a francophone elite one side, and an alienated majority on the other, which, as Jünger would say, naturally thirsted for “apotheoses” in a sea of nihilism. Under the shah’s twenty-five-year

regency, per capita GDP rose dramatically, but the country remained no less cleft than before.

Among the rabble-rousers that had taken money from the CIA to break Mossadegh's front were not a few Shiite mullahs. Among them was an ayatollah by the name of Kashani—a "holy man" whose lust for power and intrigue was notorious.⁷⁴ Among his entourage was one Ruhollah Khomeini, who promptly followed in Kashani's footsteps, by allegedly becoming one of Moscow's top informants within the Shiite hierarchy.⁷⁵ In 1960, the shah had launched a program for reform seeking the emancipation of women, the implementation of referenda, as well as the breaking up of landed estates. In 1963, to protest the reform, an alliance of Communists and Shiite clerics rose in the city of Qom and vented its rage by vandalizing schools, banks, and cultural centers, regarded as symbols of modernization.⁷⁶ The regime was caught off guard, and the shah faltered, before resolving to send in the army, which suppressed the uprising in blood. This had been the first serious shock of the shah's post-Mossadegh era—and a presage of the disorders of 1978. For, indeed, the leader of the riot had been Khomeini himself, who was then expelled from Iran, and who went on to spend the following 15 years of exile in Iraq's holy city of Najaf.

Thereafter, the shah played the Cold game dutifully. He shopped from both the United States and the USSR,⁷⁷ until in 1973, he was implicated by the United States and Israel in a trilateral harassment of Iraq. Iraq, as France's client,⁷⁸ had been recently allowed to nationalize its oil, and had come as a result to make its debut on the grand arena of international politics. Iraq's other patron was the Soviet Union. The trilateral harassment consisted in arming and instigating Iraq's Kurds against Baghdad's regime so as to "embroil Iraq in domestic turmoil" and keep in check its potential for expansion in the area.⁷⁹ To Baghdad, the Kurdish insurgency was a nuisance, but not one serious enough to destabilize the country, which was in the meantime crossing swords with Iran over their common pretension to the waterways of the Gulf. This standard Cold War ploy (the United States playing Iran against a Soviet-sponsored Iraq) evidently sought to trigger an Iraqi-Iranian conflict in which to drown the ambitions of both countries. Divide, hemorrhage, and conquer. So the shah and Saddam Hussein, then Iraq's young vice president, did something bold and unexampled; they defused the tension and composed their differences at the summit of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) at Algiers in March 1975. Their stated objective was "to consolidate their ranks" as oil producers, but above all "to exclude both the U.S. and the Soviet Union from the strategic Gulf region." The shah declared: "[Saddam Hussein and I] want to keep third parties out."⁸⁰ A CIA analyst at the time saw this as "one of the most surprising turns of the post-WWII era."⁸¹ The Unites States' outrage was immediate and loud.⁸² But it wasn't on account of his having raised the price of oil since 1973 that the shah earned the violent reprimand of the American government, as has generally been claimed.⁸³ Aside from the prospects of the Algiers conference itself, the American nervousness appeared rather to have stemmed from Iran's (as well as Iraq's) successful bid with the Europeans, led by France, to obtain nuclear technology in

exchange for oil.⁸⁴ The “weak king” had envisaged thereby the possibility of becoming, in his own words, “an immense power in the region,” whose security margin could be extended “to the 10th parallel between the south of India and the north of Ceylon.”⁸⁵ What the United States had given him in 1953 it would now take away. On the basis of experience and extensive research, Houchang Nahavandi, an internationally respected academic and former minister of Iran, maintains that “the irreversible decision to trigger a process of destabilization in Iran was taken in 1977.”⁸⁶ Carter was then president.

“The fact that fanatical movements are usually *against* something,” wrote Copeland, “makes them extremely useful when the purpose is to bring pressure on the leader of some other country.” Copeland added that “it takes very little ingenuity to convince fanatics of *any* country of the wickedness of their government, whatever its complexion. [. . .] Fanatics need no specific direction, only a general ‘go’ sign.”⁸⁷ A government that does not play along is referred to as a “scab government.”

To summarize the Standard Operating Procedure in bringing about the overthrow of a scab government: first attack the government on [the] Radio, making accusations against it which are most likely to incite fanatical groups while refraining from specific accusations which might be embarrassing to [the schemer] should the coup succeed; second, study the reactions of the propaganda so as to identify fanatics and fanatical groups which may be counted on for action; third, approach the fanatics [. . .], arm them, and learn what can be learned about *their* plans; fourth, identify suitable *non*-fanatics who might take over the leadership at the right strategic moment (sometimes before the government is overthrown, sometimes after), and consolidate the gain, and make arrangements with them.⁸⁸

The overthrow of the shah seemed to have followed mechanically the above template. The disinformation campaign had already begun on 1974, when U.S. newscasts set out to target the SAVAK (Security and Information Organization), the infamous secret police of the shah, which had been overhauled since 1953 in collusion with the CIA and the Mossad. The SAVAK’s record was probably as dirty as that of any other Middle Eastern “security” apparatus, but the Western press, echoed by Amnesty International, insisted that this organization, availing itself of a budget of millions of dollars and a manpower running in the tens of thousands, had murdered tens and incarcerated hundreds of thousands of political prisoners. These were all fabrications.⁸⁹

The “go sign” to the fanatics came in November 1977 on the occasion of the shah’s official visit to the White House. By the fence, a group of masked antishah protesters was caught on video chanting next to thousands of shah supporters. When speeches were exchanged on the lawn of the White House, a scuffle ensued between the two groups, which the police dispersed with tear gas. The shah and the President were then seen on millions of TV screens wiping their tears in a cloud of smoke. When the head of the SAVAK saw the film of the demonstration and mêlée, “he predicted that the shah was doomed: ‘Carter,’ he said, ‘was obviously prepared to dump him.’” Iran’s fanatic opposition thought likewise.

"As the Shah was leaving Washington, [. . .] Khomeini received an international call at his headquarters in exile in Najaf. On the line was [. . .] one of the Ayatollah's organizers in the United States who had helped assemble the demonstration. [. . .] He suggested to increase pressure inside Iran."⁹⁰

Khomeini's "saintly" image was first boosted—it is still not known whether by mistake or by design—in Teheran, whose main newspaper published under a pseudonym in January 1978 a denigratory piece on the cleric. It was a typical blend of fact and slanderous falsehoods (e.g., homosexuality), which had the effect of raising the stature of the target opponent by victimizing him publicly. Inflamed by the article, violent manifestations erupted in Qom once again. Shortly afterwards began the elaboration of the myth. At the time, Khomeini wielded no authority within the Shiite clergy of Iran; he had been absent far too long to have done so. Though Khomeini's writings were unknown, Nahavandi recounts how the Western media would pass off "this senile and uncultivated mullah" as "a brilliant philosopher and a theologian."⁹¹ "The carefully crafted image" of Khomeini was the work of professionals; it "played well" with the entire gamut of the world's public opinion: the aureole of sainthood appealed to devout conservatives, the revolutionary bent allured the Left, and the democratic, antidictatorial stance pleased the Liberals.⁹²

Led by France's *Le Monde* and the BBC, the press organs of the West had by the spring intensified their denunciation of Iran's "authoritarian" regime, which chimed with Carter's menacing advocacy of "human rights."⁹³ Pressured repeatedly by the shah to desist, these foreign media kept on beaming and diffusing antiregime propaganda within the country of an official ally: this was unprecedented.⁹⁴ Tension mounted and protests became increasingly more virulent. In September, the shah received China's president, who confided to him that the United States and the USSR were both intent on sabotaging his regime.⁹⁵ Likewise, the chief of French Intelligence and Turkey's elite via consular channels warned the shah to beware of the Carter administration,⁹⁶ which, they confided, was seeking his fall in connivance "with certain religious authorities."⁹⁷ Torn on one side by duplicitous doves imploring him to compromise with the fanatics and, by on the other, by callous hawks urging him to order a bloody and systematic repression, the shah was exceeded. He could not have failed to recognize those very subversive methods that had toppled his enemy Mossadegh twenty-five years previously: he was lost.⁹⁸ On September 8, the first veritable disaster occurred: responding chaotically to a massive demonstration, the police killed 121 people—this was "Black Friday." A week later Foucault landed in Teheran.

In Paris, Foucault, along with other prominent intellectuals, had been animating "support committees" for the ayatollah, which were part of France's antishah propagandistic effort: it so appeared that the country had backed out of its former commitment to provide nuclear know-how to Iran, and realigned itself. Foucault had arrived on a two-day visit, funded by one of Italy's premier newspapers *Il Corriere della sera*, whose editors considered the philosopher's mission "a major event."⁹⁹ Foucault said he went to Iran to witness "the birth of ideas." Once in Teheran (he would pay a second visit in November), he played

beautifully the part of postmodernism's radical intellectual. Though his honorarium was paid for and his opinions were soon to be diffused by the *Corriere*—the voice of Italy's capitalism—Foucault ingratiated himself with his pro-Khomeini hosts by execrating capitalist society: “The harshest,” he averred, “most savage, most selfish, most dishonest, oppressive society one could possibly imagine.”¹⁰⁰ The flattery of the Islamists, on the other hand, would not have been complete without berating Communism's “authoritarian” alternative to colonialism—such as, say, Castro's Cuba, which he loathed.¹⁰¹ Foucault then had to square the circle. Clearly, he added, Marx's dictum applied only to the Western churches at a given time: Islam in contemporary Iran was *not* the opiate of the people, but should have rather been regarded as the beginning of “a new spirituality,” not just for the Near East but also for Europe. Humble, he told the Khomeinists he had come “to observe and to learn.”¹⁰² With fascination, he had indeed observed the thousands of antishah demonstrators “wearing white shrouds as a sign of their willingness to face death.”¹⁰³

In a way, Shiisim was an Islamized digestion of Christian Gnosticism: according to its creed, Mohammed's son-in-law, Ali, was a paragon that originated a bloodline of saints, the Imams, the last and twelfth of whom, the Mahdi, vanished, and was expected to reappear at the end of days. Central to Shiisim was the cult of Ali's son, Hussein. In the war of succession that pitted his clan against the Caliphate of Damascus, Hussein was betrayed, and suffered martyrdom in the battle of Karbala at the hands of the emissaries of his rival Yazid. The Shias have since then celebrated the “sacrifice” of the son-king Hussein with passion plays featuring self-flagellation and self-mutilation in remembrance of the bloodshed. Shiisim had thus incorporated into the Mosaic model of God-prophet-book (Allah-Mohammed-Koran) two other, typical “sovereign” propensities: the dynastic predisposition (Ali's “royal blood”) and the immolation of the son-king, who shall be resurrected at the end as messiah.

Why this particular “regime of truth” should have appealed to a Bataillean such as Foucault is not hard to fathom. Bataille himself, of course, had mused with interest over Islam's original missionary push, over the illimitable tension of the permanent jihad. But he was naturally more attracted to the combination of violence and poetry, which was the mark of Arab tribalism, and which the Jihad had disseminated across the Muslim empire. Bataille ultimately lamented the absence in Sunni Islam of that “internal violence, which founds a religious life and culminates in sacrifice.”¹⁰⁴ Foucault, then, behaved as if this late and extraordinary surge of Shia Islam could have been precisely a manifestation of authentic sacredness. Foucault found little difficulty in fitting the passion play of Shiisim into his postmodern system: the villain Yazid became the “disciplinarian” shah with his SAVAK, while Hussein was played by the “old saint” Khomeini, who found himself leading from the margins “an irreducible” form of resistance against Western modernization and “the most police-ridden monarchy in the world.” This movement, Foucault wrote, was “a tidal wave without a military leadership, without a vanguard”—a typical instance of heterogeneous centerless “power.”¹⁰⁵

[The Iranian revolution] is perhaps the first great insurrection against global systems, the revolt that is the most modern and the most insane.¹⁰⁶

This Foucauldian panegyric appeared at a time when the U.S. ambassador was making overtures to the Islamists.¹⁰⁷ On December 29, 1978, the shah abdicated and nominated a figurehead to preside over a “constitutional government.” On January 6, 1979, U.S. Air Force General Huyser arrived in Teheran to secure the allegiance of the Iranian generals to the provisional government by threatening to withhold American spare parts, upon which the Iranian army was wholly dependent.¹⁰⁸ The shah departed on January 16, and Khomeini, after much hesitation for fear of a military coup, finally alighted in Teheran on February 1, acclaimed as the Mahdi, as it were, by a “tidal wave” of allegedly three million individuals. On the sixteenth, one could read in *The New York Times* that Khomeini was no dissembler, fanatic or reactionary, but rather “a hopeful sign” that could “yet provide us with a desperately needed model of humane governance” and “convince the world that ‘politics is the opiate of the people.’”¹⁰⁹ Shortly thereafter began the purges, the double-dealings, the ploys behind the liberation of the U.S. hostages, the gay- and women-bashing, and finally the war with Iraq (September 1980)—the very war the Shah had sought to prevent in 1975. The tune of the Western press changed yet again: Khomeini was no longer the old saint of the Spring of ’78, but a retrograde, homophobic, and misogynist fanatic, bent, as he himself claimed, on seeing the Islamic Revolution “conquer the world” from the talons of “the Great American Satan.” Khomeini was now a freak; he was the enemy of the West.

At home, Foucault came under attack for having written the *Corriere* articles: they cost him friends and did “his reputation no good.”¹¹⁰ To this day most of his worshippers are at loss to account for this “error.”¹¹¹ Accustomed and committed as the Foucauldians have been to the multicultural adaptation of his Power/Knowledge, they have tended to suppress this episode, which did not accord with the postmodern iconography of the philosopher. And this is yet another confirmation of the state of unconscionable denial that rules the postmodern Left today: its exponents seem unaware, or rather, refuse to acknowledge, that Foucault’s testimony was in essence that of a chaos-loving aesthete subservient to State propaganda. Clearly, his attraction to death, “rituals of penitence,” and the Khomeinists’ “intoxication of sacrifice” were all tributes to his Bataillean formation, which, as argued in this study, is virtually unknown to the Foucauldians. Even the board of the *Corriere della sera* had a better sense of what Foucault was all about, as it hired him to discredit the shah precisely by tapping the Bataillean vein of his work. And what appears just as vividly from this incident is the all-round corruptness of Foucault, who lent himself from the beginning, in 1966, to play whatever role the higher circles of the intelligentsia wished him to play: from the antihumanist alternative to Marxism in France, to the anti-conservative multiculturalist in America, by way of the anti-shah, spiritualist anarchoid in Iran. Indeed, in this instance, Foucault’s input was needed so long as would last the period of destabilization (the last six months of 1978). Like the

fanatics he had lionized, he was himself entirely disposable. Not surprisingly, he would forever hold his peace on this Iranian affair after the developments of '79. California made everybody forget.

When Foucault died, in 1984, the Iran-Iraq war hit the midpoint; it would be the longest conventional engagement of the twentieth century after World War II. When it ended, four years later, a curious sequence of diplomatic shenanigans led to its surreal sequel, the Gulf War. To continue the patient labor of mystification directed at the Western audiences, a new breed of Foucauldians—savants conversant with the upgrades of cyberspace and information technology—stepped up to provide a postmodern exegesis of war in the post-Soviet age.

Gulf One: The Grand Illusion

An established figure of postmodernism, Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) reworked Bataillean and Foucauldian mythology into the more contemporary disciplines of social psychology and communications studies. Subtitling TV ads and reportage, statistics, video games, film, and lifestyle trivia with existential soliloquy, Baudrillard trod much on the fine line dividing reality from fact, and argued that this perceived world of ours is the object of an incessant manipulation. He insisted, however, that reality is not manipulated by some at the expense of others, but that it is rather, after the manner of Foucauldian “power,” the expression of a collective nightmare. Baudrillard came to enjoy a season of fame in 1991 when he came to filter through his version of postmodernism the experience of the Gulf War.

For Baudrillard, though brilliant, Foucault’s myth of Power/Knowledge ultimately did not work. If power had been the “magnetic infiltration” Foucault purported it to be, it would have invested the entire social field long ago; conversely, had power been unilateral subjugation, it would have long since been repulsed.¹¹² Baudrillard reproached Foucault (and Bataille)¹¹³ for not having intuited that power is “an exchange”—an exchange that expends itself through “cycles of seduction.” For Baudrillard, it is true, as Foucault claimed, that an institutional antagonism between central power and periphery does *not* exist, but that is not because “power is everywhere,” but rather because power circulates everywhere in cyclical fashion. Power invests and raises a party, and then forsakes it for another. It seduces thus, with cunning, periodically annihilating itself. And what lies behind this sea of circular discharges? The Void, of course—“it is the void that lends [power] its last glimmer of reality.”¹¹⁴ Here the derivation from Heidegger is obvious.

This secret of the inexistence of power, which was once that of the great politicians, is also that of the great bankers, namely, that money is nothing, that money does not exist; this was the secret of the great theologians and inquisitors, namely, that God does not exist, because God is dead.¹¹⁵

What is being lamented is, again, the debacle of nihilism. This is a tale of our modern obsession for *rationalizing* “reality.”¹¹⁶ This “disciplinarian” obsession to

categorize and measure everything has led to a gradual extinction of the production of “satanic energy,”¹¹⁷ which has been replaced with “dead” forms and a superabundance of “reality.”¹¹⁸ Dead power is best exemplified by obscenity and fascism: hollowed pantomimes attempting to re-evoke the vertiginous powers that once were. The superabundance takes the form of facsimiles, information overkill, videos, and online simulations, all of which are “decoys.”¹¹⁹ Ours is the “Xerox-culture,”¹²⁰ where everything, from power to sex is “virtual,” fake—clonable ad libitum. Ours is the society that came one day too late; one day after “the revolution” (viz. Kojève), one day “after the orgy,” which we can do no better than reenact through porn.¹²¹ As we are the creators of this reality, our “pessimist”¹²² mania to see “the Good” prevail everywhere has spun this virtual hall, in which we mistake appearance for reality, and in which the “accursed share” takes revenge upon us for having perverted and curtailed the production of sacred energy. In other words, where Bataille’s “Evil” has been everywhere denied and suppressed, Evil regroups and metamorphoses itself to aggress the body social via “all those viral forms that obsess us.”¹²³ In politics, then, “Evil” takes the form of “terrorism,” as illness it manifest itself as cancer/AIDS, and it epitomizes the new aesthetics of eroticism with the figure of the transvestite.¹²⁴ Echoing Heidegger, Baudrillard suggested that it is not we who think Evil, but “Evil that thinks us.”¹²⁵ Hence the suggestion of our culpable vulnerability to terrorism: the latter is a disaster of our own making. It is as if our terrorist alter ego conspired continually to bomb us out of our rationalistic coma. Rejoining the macho rhetoric of Fukuyama, Baudrillard contended that it is because we have become “fanatically soft” and “tolerant” that our highly technicized world manifests such impotence before the pure, antagonistic strength of, say, Khomeini’s Islamic Republic. Khomeini is to the West what Jeckyll is to Hyde: two sides of the same afflicted soul.

Islam does not exert any revolutionary pressure upon the western universe, there is no risk of its converting or conquering it: Islam contents itself with destabilizing it by way of this viral [attack?] in the name of the principle of Evil, to which we have nothing to oppose.¹²⁶

In the end, for Baudrillard, we have no choice but to embrace Evil—to embrace, in other words, the hypothesis that we are neither good nor bad, but perfect the way we are.¹²⁷ And because Baudrillard saw politics as the favored locus of Evil, proper praxis dictates that we surrender to *power* in all its traditional guises: as privilege, vice, and corruption. “For the corruption of the elites,” he concluded, “is that of everybody,” in a world where what always wins is “the eternal incomprehensibility, the irreducible foreignness of cultures, mores, of faces and languages.”¹²⁸

In sum, Baudrillard barely deviated from Foucault and Bataille. What is of interest is the psychologistic artifice he used to revise Power/Knowledge in order to make *antagonism* disappear entirely. Baudrillard must have thought that there is no better way to *destroy the notion of political responsibility* than to regard chaos, war, and violence as mere symptoms of a deeper torment that haunts the

conscience of the world as *a whole*. In this sense, his twist is a colorful combination of Foucauldian theory, Freud, and traditional leftism (the voice of capitalism's "bad conscience"), the difference with the latter being, however, that in Baudrillard's variant of the myth, there are no victims or henchmen. Being power "reversible," henchmen and victims are interchangeable halves of the same bankrupt setup. Propaganda-wise, Baudrillard's formula was tested successfully only once, and this was in connection with the media barrage that accompanied the Gulf War of 1991.

As shall be detailed shortly, between January and March 1991, Baudrillard came into the spotlight with a series of articles that enjoyed immediate and ample diffusion in the English-speaking world. In these, Baudrillard would weave a rather singular explication of the Gulf War—one which also provoked the indignant reaction of the anti-imperialist Left. In fact, speaking himself as a leftist, Baudrillard would affirm that opposition to this war would be nugatory since the conflict itself was imaginary, it was rehearsed—a fake, in short. Now, it appears that, for as much as this contention could have been the effect of his own post-modern vision of the world, Baudrillard could not have failed to have been influenced by the particular interpretation of the Gulf War that was circulating at that time in France's journalistic environment.

While passing in review the books and memoirs of French journalists published immediately after the Gulf War, one frequently encounters the surreptitious intimation via one fact or another that this had been a staged war. As the story went, Pope John Paul II, for instance, had allegedly confessed before a visiting delegation of Middle Eastern bishops that the war had been planned to commence before August 2, 1991.¹²⁹ To corroborate the hypothesis of premeditation, various French sources cite the existence of a secret program of the Pentagon code-named "Top Fiddle" (no. 1002–90), which was reactivated by General Colin Powell two weeks before Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait: this was a war-simulation whose scenario contemplated the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq.¹³⁰ Accordingly, many French reporters found it "incredible"¹³¹ that a seasoned politico such as Saddam, who incidentally had been a CIA asset since 1959,¹³² would act so "blindly" as to assail the sovereignty of an emirate so closely tied to British interests as that of Kuwait.¹³³ What all these accounts cast in relief was the *incongruity* of the steps and decisions that led to the invasion of Kuwait on the one hand, and the escalation to a full-scale Allied intervention on the other. Saddam had fought Khomeini's Iran for eight years (in a war that cost both countries 360,000 lives), and to play the heroic role of the anti-Islamic leader he had run deeply into debt vis-à-vis the Gulf States. Insolvent, yet armed to the teeth (by the West), Saddam came presently to be dunned, especially by his Kuwaiti creditors, who deported in the process an aggressiveness that many analysts found baffling.¹³⁴ No less baffling was Saddam's hysterical response to the pretensions of such military nonentities as the Gulf sheikdoms: why not just refuse to pay? When Kuwait started in 1990 to pump oil in excess, thus driving its price down and weakening as a result Iraq's petroleum receipts, Saddam and his ministers denounced clamorously a "Zionist conspiracy" against the Arabs.

By mid-July, there was diffuse talk of a “trap,” sprung by the United States, by way of the Kuwaitis, to provoke Saddam into making a “mistake” that could afford American hawks a pretext for further deployment in the area.¹³⁵ So everybody was alert, everybody, that is, except Saddam himself, whose restlessness was said to originate in his “desperate” attempt to save his finances, even though the plan to invade was clearly deemed “suicidal”;¹³⁶ in brief, the once-shrewd Saddam had become an idiot. French publicists depicted the Americans as shifty: they were supposedly ensnaring Hussein with a “double-game,” whereby an appeasing party led by Bush I and the White House was artfully contrasted on the home front by an anti-Iraq faction comprising a majority of Congress and the Liberal media. While the former, as late as July 31 (the eve of the invasion), sold Saddam equipment,¹³⁷ and signaled overtly to him that the United States had no treaty binding it to defend Kuwait’s borders,¹³⁸ the latter had since February 1990 fulminated against Saddam, whose regime was qualified by the State Department as “the worst” in the area of “human rights.”¹³⁹

The foregoing chronicles seemed to hint that all of this might have been histrionics, and that the climax of this putative charade was reached in Baghdad on July 25, when Saddam summoned the U.S. Ambassador April Glaspie. After Glaspie conveyed the oblique message that the U.S. president was, in fact, washing his hands of the forthcoming border dispute between Iraq and Kuwait, Saddam launched into a seemingly incoherent maundering about Iraq’s “pride.” He dwelt on the inevitability of facing death to save the country’s “dignity” should Iraq’s well-being be threatened in any way. Saddam was, in fact, envisioning war with the United States, and his certain rout in the event.¹⁴⁰ This sort of “sovereign” and defeatist musing, which is actually a staple of fanatic talk, was strangely out of line with Saddam’s character. On August 2, 1990, Iraqi tanks crossed the border of Kuwait and invaded the emirate; Glaspie had gone on holiday the day before.

Claude Cheysson, a former foreign minister of France and a leading steward of France’s sponsorship of Iraq since the mid-seventies, recalled in an interview an encounter he had with Saddam’s foreign minister, Tareq Aziz, at the end of August 1990. Aziz cryptically told Cheysson that although he himself had not been favorable to the invasion, Saddam had assured him of the solidity of the “American agreement,” and had also mentioned in this connection the “precedent of General Kassem.”¹⁴¹ What this “agreement” could have been and what it could have guaranteed, a month after the invasion to boot, is a matter of speculation; but Saddam’s mention of the Kassem precedent is intriguing. In 1958, Brigadier-General Adbelkarim Kassem had seized power in Iraq with a coup, and had been thereafter involved in a complex relationship with Britain, which retained control of the Iraqi Petroleum Company (IPC). From a relatively recent study of that event, it appears that by 1960—that is, a year before it was to grant Kuwait formal independence—Britain was seeking to achieve two related objectives in the Gulf region. In order (1) to keep in check the “strong sense of independence” of Kuwait, which supplied 40 percent of Britain’s oil supplies;¹⁴² and (2) to stage a spectacular military deployment that could relaunch Britain’s

colonialist traffic in the area,¹⁴³ British military strategists thought of something. In November 1960, they “produced what was termed a ‘reinforced theater plan’ for the direct British defense of Kuwait against an Iraqi military threat. The plan was given the codename ‘Vantage.’”¹⁴⁴ On June 25, 1961, surprising the world, Kassem claimed Kuwait as a province of Iraq. Instantly, the Western press flashed news of an invasion, while British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan warned the public opinion that the Iraqi leader was “a mad and very dangerous man.”¹⁴⁵ In fact, Kassem barked but did not move: throughout the “crisis,” the Iraq-Kuwait border remained open for trade, and no Iraqi soldiers or tanks were seen pushing south.¹⁴⁶ Notwithstanding, on July 1, 10,000 British troops debarked in Kuwait and the *Daily Telegraph* exulted: “History this weekend is staging a brief flashback to the far-off days of Pax Britannica.”¹⁴⁷ It was an impressive show, and Kuwait paid for all of it. Meantime, Radio Cairo raged against “British deviousness,” which had pushed the “irresponsible” Kassem into “the imperialist trap.”¹⁴⁸ In October the British left, and an Arab contingent took over the patrolling of the Gulf. Shortly after the incident, Kassem “gave an exceptional party in honor” of the British ambassador.¹⁴⁹ If this, then, had been pretense, what could have been Kassem’s payoff? Most likely, the Law 80, negotiated with Britain in December, which contemplated the creation of an Iraqi National Oil Company with prospecting rights over areas ceded to it by the IPC.¹⁵⁰ The law was to come in force in 1963, but Kassem would never reap its benefits, for a CIA-engineered coup unseated his regime in February 1963 and brought to power the Baathists, who executed the general.¹⁵¹ Saddam’s tortuous ascent to power dated from this coup.¹⁵²

So Aziz seemed to have intimated to Cheysson that the Gulf War was going to be some sort of replay. Immediately after Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait, all the major powers including the USSR voted for U.N. Resolution 660, which called for an immediate withdrawal of Iraq’s forces from the emirate. But Saddam seemed irremovable. He alleged that he would only trade his retreat for that of Israel from the occupied territories, which was patent bluster, not diplomatic talk. America, too, was inflexible; Saddam, Bush had realized, was Hitler. The Soviet president, Gorbachev, sent an envoy, Evgheni Primakov, to reason with Saddam in October, but to no avail: Primakov told Hussein that if he persevered, he would face war, and lose it. “Perhaps,” was Saddam’s response.¹⁵³ Following some inane bickering about scheduling, a final meeting between U.S. Secretary of State James Baker and Tareq Aziz was arranged in Geneva on January 9, 1991. The performance put on by the protagonists, as transcribed in the French memoirs, was worthy of Ionesco’s theater of the absurd. As Baker gave Aziz to understand that a war against the United States was not going to be comparable to the clash with Iran, Aziz countered that Americans did not know what the desert was. Aziz sneered: “Mr. Secretary of State, you’ve never ridden on a camel’s back.”¹⁵⁴

On February 16, 1991, Operation Desert Storm was launched. This was the first televised mayhem ever viewed by a Western audience. With its blurs of black and green streaked by showers of sparks, it was said that CNN’s film of Baghdad

made this war look like a video game. Over those fluorescent skies, the Allied coalition, led by America, Britain, and France, flew 110,000 sorties for a week and allegedly dropped the equivalent of seven Hiroshima bombs. The Allies assured that their targeting was “surgical,” but it was subsequently found out that 93 percent of those bombs were dropped helter-skelter. While Bush I himself was portrayed sitting at home zapping frantically from one channel to another, and exclaiming “Jesus!” at every blast, Saddam was hollering through Radio Baghdad that the “Mother of all battles” had just commenced to defeat the “Satan Bush.”¹⁵⁵ French reporters noted a great many other oddities. To begin, there was no curfew: during these initial aerial raids, Baghdad was “lit up like Las Vegas”; U.S. pilots were finding this all “too easy.” At the Pentagon, it felt like “smashing a mosquito with a hammer.”¹⁵⁶ Everyone wondered where had gone those posh jet fighters that Iraq had purchased from France in the eighties, why weren’t they used? It happened that they had been safely smuggled to nearby Iran, which affected neutrality, while “other planes were dispersed as far away as India and Algeria.”¹⁵⁷ On February 24, ground operations began. But there was no fighting. Iraqi soldiers, who appeared to the outsiders as a stupefied lot, surrendered, thousands at a time, to the Allied armies without firing a single shot.¹⁵⁸ After three days, it was over, Kuwait City was liberated, and the Iraqis withdrew. Bush I then incited the Shiites of the south to rebel, which they did. But concomitantly, the U.S. forces allowed Saddam’s elite corps, the Republican Guard, to slip across the border so as to crush the rebellion. The rationale affected by the Americans for such a perplexing volte-face was that a victory of the Shiites in the south could have afforded Iran a base for the spread of Islamism, which was not the truth. Iraqi Shias had just fought Iran in the regular army for eight years. On April 3, 1991, the U.N. cease-fire stilled the maneuvers: though weakened and formally excluded from two buffer zones in the north and south, Saddam was still the ruler of Baghdad. The world audiences then started to wonder what on earth this conflict could have possibly signified. In one documented instance, Iraqi civilians had been killed in a shelter and hundreds of retreating Iraqi troops cowardly butchered by air-fire on February 24. Yet, throughout the engagement, though they had been loquacious when asked to comment on the destruction of Iraq’s military apparatus, Allied generals had fallen mute on the subject of Iraqi losses. There was never an official count. Later, the Pentagon and the Saudis advanced an estimate of roughly 100,000 dead,¹⁵⁹ but it was never corroborated. The Allies had fielded a contingent of 744,000 men to dragoon an Arab wasteland with a gross product that was not even a twentieth of that of France. The United States, which had contributed half a million men to that contingent, lost 147 soldiers, the majority of them in logistical accidents. Military analysts posed uncomfortable questions: What, in fact, had been hit? Certainly, the bulk of Saddam’s tank force had been pulverized, but these were obsolescent Russian-made T55s, whose wrecking was welcome.¹⁶⁰ The existence of those superequipped underground bunkers, in which the impregnable Saddam had supposedly lurked, could never be ascertained. And suspicions ran high that a great deal of fire power had been squandered on decoys—inflateable tanks, armor of plaster, and cardboard

planes—an enormous amount of which Iraq had been commissioned from Italy, Belgium, and France.¹⁶¹ Though he had promised to ravage Israel with a bacteriological scourge should he be attacked, Saddam ended up catapulting pell-mell 86 missiles with no chemical heads over Israel (and Saudi Arabia). These launches caused four deaths and little damage; they earned Saddam few cheers amid the Arab populace and no military gain whatsoever.¹⁶² As for the burning oil fields, they were most likely hit accidentally by Allied fighters. No reporters were allowed on the sites, hence the prompt montage of the CNN showing recycled footage of a baby cormorant mired in crude.¹⁶³

In sum, France's contemporary reportage on the Gulf War appeared to insinuate that this incident had been a grand parody of a war. A replay, indeed, of the "reinforced theater plan" of 1961. As in those days, the rich oil sheiks of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia had been pressured once again to pay for the spectacle, and to bribe into the bargain a whole new cast of participants including Egypt, Turkey, Syria, and Russia.¹⁶⁴ What for? The French experts proposed four main reasons: (1) to allow thereby the American forces to establish in Saudi Arabia a durable military presence, which had been denied to them until then;¹⁶⁵ (2) to reinforce the security of Israel as a consequence; (3) to blast away the arsenals of the West and rekindle its armament industry;¹⁶⁶ and (4) to "freeze"¹⁶⁷ Iraq into a derelict oil-smuggling precinct¹⁶⁸ by means of a regime of U.N. sanctions so long as the geopolitical fate of Russia remained unsettled. It was understood that, from the outset, none of this could have succeeded without Saddam's full, theatrical complicity.

How did Baudrillard process for the leftist public such rich, controversial material? The Gulf War, he said, was but the second installment of a generalized tendency to reduce the "dangerous" and "refractory culture" of Islam to the Western "world order."¹⁶⁹ The first had been the Iran-Iraq war, whose objective, as Kissinger put it, was that neither country should win. Therefore, as if to settle scores, Saddam and the Americans had gone to the mat—Saddam to seek revenge for having been played, and the Americans to rid themselves of a cumbersome accomplice.¹⁷⁰ But this conflict was no conspiracy of elites: it was rather the subconscious wish of Western society to strike repeatedly at the "irreducible alterity" of Islam, and which knew of no better ways to employ its swelling surpluses than to squander them in fabricated bloodfests.¹⁷¹ The fruit of such collective anguish became "the virtual apocalypse" of the Gulf War. This was a "dead," "unreal, "rigged," "sexless," and "anorexic" war, which, by blasting your surroundings while letting you live, was worse than the conventional one.¹⁷² "Crazies" like Saddam with which to run this "rotten simulation" were never in short supply. Leveraging the "pride" of this "cunning" "dumbass," and parading him like a "CIA agent dressed up as Saladin," the West could now and then channel its disruptive forces.¹⁷³ "The objective complicity" of an "eternal, hysterical shithook" like Saddam could be counted on to "pimp the Arab world" to the perverse appetites of the restless West. In this "masquerade" of a war, waged with "smart bombs" and "minor losses," everybody, and everything, was "hidden." Hidden behind the masks of the decoys, bought in profusion from Italy, that

country of natural born hustlers, faction of an industrial apparatus ever more focused on the perfection of standardized “counterfeit.” Counterfeit like that of placebos and especially of “censored information,” which the buzzing media networks “inoculated” in our heads by means of “phony discourse.”¹⁷⁴ In this “irrespirable atmosphere of deception and stupidity,” everyone cheated: when the decoys ran out, targets had to be bombed five consecutive times, while Saddam hurled his petards and “Israel played possum.” On TV, we saw American “jazzbo” versus Iraqi “hokum”: like “circus grifters,” the two enemies fussed by day and consorted by night. And the news kept us all “in erection,” “jacking-off on empty” to this poor show, in which Saddam was played by a “fictitious double.” “Bad actors, bad stunts, bad strippers,” but boosted ratings and profits galore for the TV sponsors.¹⁷⁵ So, in the end, “being pro or against this war [was] idiotic.” Idiotic like the “imbroglio” of those “pacifist” street protests, which were indirectly for Saddam. “Enveloped by a halo of bluff,” “a sentimental patriotism” in our breast had allowed the media to terrorize us a bit with these phony tales of war. But deep down nothing could be done, really, because, “no one gave a shit.” In short, the Gulf War “had not happened.”¹⁷⁶

This was a skillful argument. A typical instance of leftist discourse crafted to defuse popular outrage (i.e., radicalism). Its power resided in the use Baudrillard made of *ambiguity* in fusing evidence, common prejudice, and disenchanted iconoclasm into a Foucauldian mold. In other words, even though most viewers could not but suspect foul play behind this war and doubt the veraciousness of the official version, Baudrillard accompanied that perception without, however, construing it as anybody’s intentional fault. As a leftist, he berated capitalist society, but on the other hand, he deprecated Saddam, and dismissed both as the grotesque, inseparable halves of a Western subconscious tantrum. A tantrum, metaphorically speaking, triggered by Islam’s “viral” attack against the disciplinarian world of the West. Nobody was “in the know”: Bush was no less unwitting than Saddam, both being ugly masks of the same hallucination. In a sense, Baudrillard, like Foucault in 1978, appeared to be rooting for Islamism, which he was, but in this instance he caught the anti-imperialist Left off guard by exposing the awkwardness of manifesting for peace when the alternative was admittedly a “shithook” like Saddam. What was more, Baudrillard thus made inaction a fashionable pose on the Left, playing, as it were, on the dislike and negative prejudice that most Westerners harbor for the Arabs. From the establishment’s viewpoint, a cynical, inactive leftism of this sort was ideal: it equivocated about the reality of the war, but did nothing about it. The antiwar Left, instead, took the explosions, rants, and CNN updates at face value, but was hard put to explain the deeper nature of the conflict, let alone define a militant stance on the topic. Baudrillard’s critics of the Left decried *The Gulf War Did Not Happen* as a “post-modern screed,”¹⁷⁷ “sheer nonsense” culpable of marring the issue with relativism, and of breaking “moral and political nerve” with a “cynical acquiescence” to the ways of the establishment.¹⁷⁸ But Baudrillard’s leftism won the match.

This was an important precedent. It heralded the complete ineffectuality of the pacifist Left in preventing bloodshed in March of 2003, when, upon premises nearly identical to those of 1991, the United States put an end to Saddam's satrapy. And it established the incapacity of the peaceniks to overcome in the post-Soviet age the dualism of the Cold War. So long as the strife produced romantic effigies such as Che Guevara and constellations of anticolonialist insurrections, it was rather facile to take the radical stand and deprecate the Western exploiter. But when the geopolitical scene was altered somewhat, and the "Islamic civilization" became the enemy bloc, the leftists could not bring themselves to cheer for its icons—the Khomeinis, Saddams, and Bin Ladens. Hence, the flourish of Foucauldian tales and the general sense of resigned powerlessness in the face of death and conflict. It was hardly a surprise, therefore, that the War on Terror that followed 9/11 would have granted these tales of globalized power a second lease on life.

The War on Terror

Terrorism is immoral. [. . .] So let us be immoral [. . .], if we want to figure things out.

Jean Baudrillard, *L'esprit du terrorisme*¹⁷⁹

When the Soviet Union passed away in 1990, the consequences of the dissolution were felt in Europe more than they were in the United States, which had by then profitably fitted a great many of its surviving leftists in the new receptacles of feminist and relativist ("cultural") studies. Overall, the former Left at this time sundered into four factions: a sizable detachment turned its coat and flowed into the mainstream (i.e., as "pro-market" Democrats, or even Neocons), another substantial portion defected to postmodernism, a fringe joined the scattered ranks of antioligarchic conspiracy theorists, and the rump of what used to be the vast anti-imperialist party of the sixties persisted. Still clustered about its senescent standard-bearers, it has recited ever more uncouthly the part that had been its own since the days of the glorious marches, namely, that of hailing any foreign political leadership that happened to be the victim of Western, "capitalist" aggression. Lately, in America, it is this semidecimated rearguard of the old Socialist front that the establishment makes a practice of engaging polemically as "the Left," or "the Liberals."

With regard to the War on Terror, the diffused opinions of this disarticulated Left are thus fanned out. At one end stands the anti-imperialist Left. It is followed by the postmodernists, who are themselves divided into an antiwar faction and a prowar faction. To the right of this last, schismatic grouping lies but the government's explanation itself. The official version describes "the attacks of 9-11" as a "shock," but not a surprise.¹⁸⁰ According to the *9-11 Report*, this act of sabotage was perpetrated by the benighted vanguard of a culture "disoriented by [the] cyclonic change" of "modernity and globalization."¹⁸¹ Plagued by "state monopolies" and unable to "welcome modernization," continues the *Report*,

these Arab States have “stifled growth” and “crippled overall economic productivity” also by “repressing and isolating women.”¹⁸² All such ethnic frustration born out of market failure has allegedly led hordes of disillusioned Arabs into the arms of Bin Laden, qualified by the *Report* “as a symbol of resistance—above all resistance to the West and America.”¹⁸³

In the face of 9/11 the immediate reaction of a worthy Left should have been twofold. First, it should have demanded that no retaliatory measure whatsoever be taken without having ascertained *in a court of law*, and in the most meticulous and definite manner, the identity of the masterminds, their motive, and the means employed to carry out the sabotage. Second, it should have proceeded on this basis to involve the Arab world—via the pacifist representatives of its political, economic, and religious spheres—in defusing the tension, and invited the world community to refute the existence of a cultural clash between the Western and the Mideastern worlds. The first and decisive task was entirely discarded. And the second one, which was admittedly more difficult, aborted from the start. Any Westerner who has set foot in the Middle East, and observed, knows that there is no such thing as this purported spiritual chasm setting our society apart from that of the Arabs. In terms of mere power relations vis-à-vis the West, the reality of the Middle East is one of patent technical, economic, and military inferiority. Culturally speaking, it is a world no less bankrupt than ours: its Islamic revival is as hollow as the late spurts of evangelism in America. Islamism, Islamic banking, and the new waves of *hijabed* women (many of them nowadays wearing tight jeans to match) are a phenomenon that dates from the seventies—a rebound from a time marked by the conclusive humiliation of the Yom Kippur War, after which an increasing number of Arabs have, in their quest for social identity, traded in the secularism of post-World War II for a perfunctory resumption of Islamic devoutness. This ever-flammable and collective bigoted fury, which the Western media have been imputing obsessively to the *Arab* (and Persian) *folk* since the days of Khomeini, is, in fact, an invention. From Cairo to Damascus and the Gulf, by way of Lebanon’s Bekaa valley, what actually strikes the Western guest is the meekness of the Arab people. A people that is no less confused than its Western counterpart as to the drift of world politics, and that harbors, in spite of all, no prejudicial dislike whatsoever for the occidental visitor. If only we always came in peace—and we know it—this would be a different world. And maybe the Arabs may teach us something in this regard.

The situation, however, is greatly complicated by the Arab establishment on the one hand, and the official Orientalist debate on the other. Virtually all Arab heads of State have upheld the Western explication of 9/11 and have thereby given credence that a sizable stratum of the Arab body social is indeed affected with this viral, destabilizing, and uncontrollable disease of radical Islamism. How damaging this has been for an attempt at mutual understanding cannot be emphasized enough. For instance, the TV channel Al-Jazeera—headquartered in the Gulf State of Qatar, where the U.S. Army has stationed its greatest deployment base in the area—has fulfilled in this connection a significant role by playing the inflammatory Arab counteraltar to America’s patriotic newscasting. It is,

moreover, through videotapes that have been timely aired by Al-Jazeera that Bin Laden “speaks.”¹⁸⁴ This antithetical role-playing has been further reinforced by the late revival and political toleration in the Arab institutional panorama of the Muslim Brotherhood. At the grass roots, its preachers have been deputized to agitate against Israel and the West as sheiks in the mosques, and as theologians (of the Sharia colleges) in the curricular space of Westernized universities. A modern political movement (founded in 1928), with a complex history and a reputation for extraordinary mercenariness,¹⁸⁵ the Brotherhood has effectively sustained the clime of hostility required by the War on Terror to thrive. It has done so through some of its spokesmen by professing a not undisguised admiration for the myth of Bin Laden, and by pursuing the dream of an all-encompassing Muslim community. A project of this sort presupposes, in fact, the “fragmentation of territorial sovereignties” and the establishment of mafias and “transnational networks” disconnected from any State and national environment, such as those operative in the war theaters of Bosnia, Chechenya, Afghanistan, and the Philippines. In this point, the interests of Islamism converge with those of American imperialism, which profits from such geopolitical fragmentation in three ways: (1) by extending the radius of its Eurasian penetration, (2) by supplying ready markets for weapons and raw resources, and (3) by impeding thereby the emergence “of competing poles.”¹⁸⁶

On the intellectual front, a coalition and dialogue for peace and truth between Westerners and Arabs has been thwarted by an incessant replay of the old Orientalist dispute, which is the Arabizing offshoot of multiculturalism. America’s and Europe’s rostrums of higher learning have thus been occupied by scholars of Middle Eastern extraction, whose routine is to rail against the racist depiction by Westerners of all things Arab. Again, there can be no denying that the West is racist and supremacist, and that a great deal of its ethnography may be discounted on this account. But Western prepossession is no more responsible for this communication breakdown than the incapacity of the Arab professors to explain what the Middle East actually is.¹⁸⁷ In truth, these intellectuals have not been able to admit that their world is on the defensive in every respect—especially the spiritual/religious one, which has shown to possess virtually nothing with which to oppose Western soccer, fashion, fast food, and films. Those millions of satellite dishes atop the roofs of Mideastern cities are a sad testimony to this reality. And the tragic irony is that this alleged “satanic,” “irreducible,” spiritual vigor, which we Westerners are presently wont to attribute to the Arabs, is itself the latest contrivance of Orientalism—one originally custom-tailored, as it were, by Foucault upon orders from the Western media. This, rather, should have been a time to come together and assess what each has to offer, see then what it is truly worth, and possibly redefine everything.

But there seems to have been no time or desire for peace or honesty. Since the Iranian days of Foucault and the post-Soviet whims of Huntington, Western intelligentsia has been collecting many such fabulous tales of the Orient. And after 9/11 it has taken extreme care to assemble and compose them in captivating ways. As said, the administration of Bush II has been in a rush, and the public

debate had to be so structured as to mobilize swiftly support for the War on Terror, while affording no possible avenue for dissent. This was achieved by a measured allotment of media exposure to the select array of political voices mentioned above, namely, the antiwar Left and the currents within postmodernism.

The anti-imperialist gurus have denounced terrorism, although they reckon the latter an “understandable” reaction, a sort of red harvest for America’s protracted spell of imperial meddling—a scourge that they refer to as the “Blowback” effect. As explained by the proponents of this “theory,” “Blowback” is a term first used in 1954 by the CIA on the 1953 operation to overthrow the government of Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran. It is a metaphor for the *unintended consequences* of covert operations against foreign nations and governments: bringing the Shah to power brought 25 years of tyranny.¹⁸⁸ So while the antiwar Left has been taking its analytical cues from the CIA, the Foucauldians have split up into three formations. Two tailend minorities and the bulk distributed in the center: Baudrillard’s psycho-dramatic interpretation of 9/11 at one end, Hardt and Negri in the middle, and the warmongering (male and female) feminists at the other end. Baudrillard recycled his adventure from the Gulf, claiming this time that the destruction of the Twin Towers was, deep down, an act of masochism, whereby we had punished this obsessive craving of ours for “definitive order.”¹⁸⁹ Thus, it was as if the towers had “committed suicide.”¹⁹⁰ Terrorism, once more, was the virus spawned by the “ferocious jealousy” that the cloven psyche of this “desacralized” West nurtured for the sacrificial energy of Islam. And so, by way of these heterogeneous agents that offer their death in a symbolic exchange (the terrorists), we finally turned the obsession against ourselves and contemplated, “with an unavowable complicity,” this “beautiful” suicide.¹⁹¹ Now, Baudrillard should have anticipated that his trick of the “eventful non-event,” which had worked in 1991 to suggest that people ought not to rise against a war that was phony, was unlikely to appeal to an intelligentsia bent on leveraging popular indignation on the basis of a deed whose reality was never to be questioned. Far more presentable, therefore, was the intermediate position of Hardt and Negri, who have led with assurance the Foucauldian mainstream, and reveled in the laurels awarded to them by the press. Like Baudrillard, Hardt and Negri have denied the existence of a clash of civilizations, while contending, on the other hand, that the fetishes of, say, Saddam or Bin Laden are “pedagogical tools,” the “stand-ins for the more general threat” of this new terrorist enemy network “with no center.”¹⁹² The rest of the radical academia has rallied to this approach, rehashing that terror is the “downside” of the “objective ambiguity of globalization.” In other words, Al-Qaeda’s “subculture of resistance” is the “backlash” of “retrograde, pre-modern Islamic fundamentalism,” against Bush II’s “old fashioned patriarchal and unilateralist Wild West militarism.”¹⁹³ Or, to couch the same idea in the old leftist jargon, Bin Laden’s turning “on his creators” at the CIA “seems to offer a textbook example of dialectical reverse”—a process of reaction and counterreaction “that does not have to come to a synthesis.”¹⁹⁴ Which is a needlessly pretentious parroting of Vice President Cheney’s alarm that the War on Terror “will not end in our life-time.” None of this was original, of

course. Not because it was Foucauldian, but rather because it was derivative of a catchphrase coined by an academic in 1992, according to which the world has come to be driven by the antagonistic relationship between the “Jihad” of “parochial hatreds” and the “universalizing markets” of “McWorld.”¹⁹⁵ A catchphrase, indeed, that was but a variation on Huntington’s clash of civilizations. So, in the end, the boilerplate has been the same for all.

What of the women? What of the mothers and the lovers of these warring men? What have they said and done? Aristophanes’s most moving play is indeed that of *Lysistrata*, an Athenian who thought of stopping the carnage in the Peloponnesus by inviting her sisters across Hellas to withhold the pleasures of sex from their war-crazed husbands until these laid down their weapons (a play that had infuriated Strauss).¹⁹⁶ Where were the *Lysistratas* of America? Apparently nowhere. As far as media coverage was concerned, we saw only one mother of a boy shot dead in Iraq rattle the gates of the president’s Texan ranch; and her supplication was deeply resented by the local community. Among the intellectuals, not all feminists, of course, fell for what they saw as the “utmost hypocrisy”¹⁹⁷ of George and Laura Bush’s purported wars of women’s liberation in Afghanistan. But it was nonetheless troubling to find belligerence even amid the ranks of those who claim to be “powerful voices ready to challenge the enormous barrage of lies surrounding U.S. foreign policy.”¹⁹⁸ One of such feminist voices lamented after 9/11 the government’s “neopatriarchal subordination of women” within the armed forces. This voice argued that “one would have expected that elites would have welcomed the skills of all citizens for military service.”¹⁹⁹ Skills? It so seemed that women themselves were clamoring for their share of the killing in the Mideast, but that Bush II had patronizingly phased them out.

In any event, that a sizable segment of the feminist faction has countenanced the War on Terror either through apathy or through downright militancy is indisputable. As explained by one postmodernist, “faced with an enemy as incomprehensible and as implacable as Bin Laden, much of the Left checked the man’s policy positions on women, homosexuality, secularism, and facial hair, and slowly backed out of action.”²⁰⁰ Others, instead, have jumped right in, saluting the War on Terror, not as a clash of civilizations, but as a global struggle of “democratic secularism” and “feminism” against “authoritarian patriarchal religion.”²⁰¹ Such is the bellicose current of postmodernism that has rejoined the conservatives after 9/11. Its spokespersons make up a self-styled “third force” of Liberal, “humanitarian” hawks, resolved to assume a “progressive” role, these days especially, in opposition to “Islamofascism.” Accused of being prostitutes by their former leftist mates, these progressives have responded that “a few insider contracts with Bush’s cronies [. . .], a bit of retrograde Bible thumping, Bush’s ridiculous tax cuts, and his bonanzas for the superrich” are still petty matters if contrasted to, say, Saddam’s abominable rule.²⁰²

In conclusion, this plethora of opinion weaving on the War on Terror is the labor of intellectuals, whose credentials as historians, political economists, and students of terrorism are virtually nonexistent. They have simply regurgitated through semi-identical schemes information that has found its way into an

industrial throughput of books on Bin Laden, Islamism, and Al-Qaeda. How there could be such a torrential flow of data on an organization officially considered impenetrable and hitherto invincible is moreover an oddity that has not seemed to perturb these leftists in the least. Though this is not the proper venue for treating such a subject, which is better left for a future book, a suitable point of departure for understanding Islamic terrorism is a memoir drafted by Mohammed Samraoui, a former high-ranking officer of Algerian Intelligence. Samraoui describes the nature and dynamics of this phenomenon when it first appeared in Algeria during the early nineties.²⁰³

So, barring minor variations and suppressing the more or less polemical accents, it is readily seen that the views on 9/11 propounded by the established Left coincide for all intents and purposes with the government's interpretation of the event. In fact, the anti-imperialists' "Blowback" and the Foucauldians' "heterogenous" and "symbolic" "backlash" against globalization add nothing to the National Commission's *Report*, which captions Islamic terrorism "a symbol of resistance against cyclonic change." And what is even more remarkable is the way in which the official version has insulated itself from dissenting attack by inducing a system of self-policing conducted in antagonistic fashion by the several factions of the Left itself. Consider first the mainstream Foucauldians. On the one hand, for sport, they have gloatingly derided the likes of Huntington, who, Hardt and Negri snickered, has allegedly fallen from grace since the government has disowned the "clash of civilizations"²⁰⁴—which is not true. On the other, they have turned against their former brethren on the antiwar Left by insinuating with studied malice that some of their language is not only obsolete but smacks indeed of "anti-Semitism."²⁰⁵ Thus provoked, the anti-imperialist Marxists have bitten back at the Foucauldians, recriminating that the latter, instead, have been "manipulated by the masters of the system," for whom postmodernism is allegedly nothing but an "ideological accessory."²⁰⁶ And while the postmodern bellicists have accused the peaceniks of "isolationism" and immobilist complicity with "Islamofascism," the latter have retorted that siding with Bush was signing "a pact with the devil."²⁰⁷ On the other front, whenever the surliest among the antiwar activists have gone so far as describing 9/11 as "karma,"²⁰⁸ the Liberal-conservative press has rejoiced at the opportunity. The opportunity to paint the whole Left not just as "unpatriotic" but, more pointedly, as cynical, callous, if not inhuman ("unpatriotic" being actually a label that works best as a tool for defaming dissenting voices on the Right). For the same reason, the establishment has profited from this sort of anti-imperialist exaggeration no less than from the Bataillean excesses of Baudrillard and his ilk. When Baudrillard spoke of "beautiful suicide," and the music composer Stockhausen had the audacity to proclaim the conflagrations of 9/11 "the most sublime works of art,"²⁰⁹ the press could, instantly and effectively, muster indignation aplenty with which to dress down the ultra-Gnostic posers for their "morbid" follies and insufferable "fascination for the terrorists."²¹⁰ Finally, this propagandistic theater appears to be built in such a way that, no matter how internally divided the action may appear, it is capable of closing ranks rather efficaciously against any

alternative theory or approach—especially one seeking to establish responsibility for political malfeasance. A substantive critique leveled *from the outside* at this leftist assembly will be dismissed as “fascist” by the anti-imperialists, as “racist” by the Foucauldians, and as “conspiratorial” by all of them, with the added censure of the establishment. The mechanism is airtight.

Nothing epitomizes the discomfiture of dissent better than the late tenure of the mainstream Foucauldians over the fate of the Left in these obscene times of war and geopolitical chicane. The story told in this manuscript is that of a neo-Gnostic thinker and modern worshipper of Aztec sacrifice, who had conceived a sociological theory whereby he could account for the nature and motions of power. The sixth, seventh, and ninth chapters have detailed the extraordinary path that Bataille’s insights would traverse before they were transformed by Foucault and his followers into a specious fantasy, which the American empire has come to incorporate in its institutional makeup. It is a bewildering story, which could have been hardly imaginable when Bataille redacted his notes for the *Collège de Sociologie*. Hardly imaginable, but not impossible, considering in the end the unabashed espousal of violence, mendacity, and arrogance (“sovereignty”) that ties the Bataillean vision to the contemporary way of power.

Summary and Conclusions

There are two levels to what has been here referred to as “postmodernism.” On the one hand, there is its “commercial” facet, so to speak, and its “artistic,” valuable prototype, on the other. And the two are somewhat different things. The postmodernism conventionally spoken of is the commercial production, which has made inroads into America’s public discourse since the reception of Foucauldians such as Lyotard and the new wave of French antihumanists. It is this pragmatic decalogue of relativism and antagonism wielded for their own sake that has been lately incorporated into the ethos of the American bureaucracy. Dressed up as the imperative of “respecting each other’s differences,” such an incorporation has been reckoned by the self-congratulatory speech of the authorities a most important milestone on the path to higher civility. That the country’s white elites are no less intolerant than they were before, and that they have profited from congealing, as it were, the unresolved problems stemming from their incapacity to treat “the others” as nothing but second or third-class citizens, is understood. That is especially the case with America’s Hispanic community, whose “diversity” (witness the spate of dual-language provisions set up in its “favor”) is flattered so long as it remains an enclave supplying slave work. A country that is not so deeply consumed with racial neuroses does not need to remind itself every day to show respect for “difference.”

What the politics of diversity has effected on the plane of common interaction among “different” individuals is now evident. And that is a general impossibility of weaving genuine communication lest the sensibility of “victimized” people (and everyone may ultimately exhume some distinctive trait to pass as such) be violently aroused by statements that may be interpreted in any way as detracting from the uniqueness of the interlocutors. And it was not unforeseeable that such a clime of fostered incomprehensibility would lead to the sort of strident dissension and organizational palsy that has handicapped the Left since 9/11.

So far, this development may be set down as a refinement of the proverbial “divide and conquer.” But there was mythology as well. There has been *creed* involved in all this. Of their “skepticism,” “anticlericalism,” and religion-bashing the postmodern critics have made a profession. Yet, the fanatical passion with which they have espoused Foucault’s Power/Knowledge is itself the mark of

religious sentiment. The Foucauldian construct is wholly metaphysical. Disbelieving the monotheistic God, while believing in life being spawned at random by the aboriginal Void, is still believing. The intangible notion of "power," Gnosticism's *dynamis*, could not be further removed from the positivist and rationalist confidence that these critics otherwise display in their daily activity. So we have been confronted with this odd spectacle of sober and computer-savvy intellectuals, proudly professing their agnosticism and good Liberal upbringing, who swear at the same time by the Gnostic verb of Foucault and Heidegger (or any vulgarized reduction thereof). It is the schizoid allure of this sleepwalking professoriat, half-Liberal, half-Gnostic, that gives contemporary higher learning in America such an air of hallucinated unreality.

But there is a deeper theoretical truth to this state of affairs. The truth being that nearly everyone seems agreed that the so-called Liberal age, this celebrated time of democracy and freedom dating from the Industrial Revolution, has not merely failed, but, in fact, has never existed as such. The advent of technique, markets, business, and consumerism did not herald the dawn of an era of freedom but rather the overwhelming mechanization of production and of the exercise of power, which has remained *dynastic*. It was indeed an extraordinary transformation, but certainly not one that brought with it more freedom. At the top, command passed from blood elites to moneyed elites. The holocaust, on the other hand, did not disappear; if anything, it was enormously boosted by powers of devastation that no longer dismembered but rather bombed. The suspicion that there lay a lie behind the unbounded optimism of the Enlightenment, and successively of British Liberalism (from John Locke to Alfred Marshall), was confirmed at the outset by the testimony of the Marquis de Sade. Sade was indeed an early Liberal, who had proven that a society, in which nature and reason were enthroned, would not function to guarantee the cultivation of virtue, but would rather affirm the right of the strongest to impose their will by means of violence. And so it has been—especially in the last century, the bloodiest of our recent history.

Liberalism, therefore, has long ceased to have any answers and theories, if it ever did, with which to explain the sort of spiritual environment in which the West has been living for the past three hundred years. As for the Marxists, they should have graciously changed their views long ago—at least since the experience of World War I, during which the "workers of the world," instead of uniting, butchered one another in a world, patriotic conflict. Whither to turn, then? This left Veblen, on the one hand, and Bataille and Jünger, on the other. Apollinian the former, Dionysian the latter. The works of Bataille and Jünger represent the "artistic," valuable component of postmodernism because, no matter how foul their aspirations, both authors strove to offer a realistic depiction of our reality—something that may not at all be said for the other exponents of this movement (both on the Left and on the Right), with the possible exception of Kojève. Other than being born nearly fifty years after him, Bataille and Jünger had an advantage over Veblen: they were not Victorians consumed with the illusion that technology could heal the bulk of modernity's infirmities. Therefore,

they were able to construe our times as those of nihilistic transformation, in which a tide of alien, technicized patterns of control has pervaded the entirety of the traditional power structure, *centralizing* it, and thereby abolishing any residual forms of ancient, barbarous domination. According to this theory, the Industrial Revolution was but an intermediate phase leading from the epoch of, say, Gilles de Rais to the final stage of the *Glass Bees*, which is our world. Because they were nostalgics, Bataille and Jünger withdrew, and it was then up to individuals such as Kojève to incite the power-hungry to climb the bureaucratic ladder of this centralized and inescapable power structure. In this sense, contemporary postmodernists of the Left and the Right are Kojevians: they acknowledge that this is the world, and that it cannot be overcome—thus, they might as well wield as much power as the network will afford them, each filling the available position that best agrees with his or her temper. Those wishing to play boss will choose Strauss, while the Sunday rebels shall act Foucauldian.

Of course, neither Bataille nor Jünger had ever suggested that power is “decentered.” They argued, realistically, the contrary proposition, determined as they were to offer a penetrating characterization of this obsession of theirs that is power. They might have been both spiritually corrupt, but they were not intellectually dishonest. Intellectually dishonest like Foucault, instead, who plagiarized Bataille’s philosophy of transgression, the *Collège*’s lectures on the “core,” and the power dynamics of the *Accursed Share* to assemble his Power/Knowledge, which he then sold as a Niezschean meditation, spiced with a dash of Heidegger. Power/Knowledge was nonetheless an achievement in itself, for it was the first successful specimen of a re-elaboration of neo-Gnostic myth (Bataille’s) fit for propagandistic employ. It was successful because it retained the extreme plausibility of Bataille’s original characterization of homogeneous and heterogeneous forces, without being burdened on the one hand by its dubious cosmogonic preamble (the headless god), and by a need to identify political responsibility on the other (“no center”). What had disappeared in Power/Knowledge was power itself: clearly, if everyone is powerful, no one is guilty—ergo, the exploitative and war mongering elite goes scot-free. But this argumentation, however, does not let Bataille off the hook. His tale might have been distorted, but he, like every elitist, believed in antagonism, aristocratic disdain (i.e., “sovereignty”) and the necessity of war; and the reason he has not been directly endorsed—but only indirectly via Foucault—is, as we have argued, that his production was too pornographic, blunt, or sketchy for a Liberal stomach. What was needed to diffuse this sort of myth was an orderly *system*, a “theory,” which Foucault provided. This was the first system that gave the *rabble*—not the working proletariat—theoretical dignity, and was therefore ideal for institutionalizing, speech-wise, a state of tribal warfare, which ultimately spared the elites by portraying them as faceless and decentered, and by contemplating no resolution to the dynamics of opposition (between the gutter and the State).

So Bataille and Jünger have not made it into the Anglo-American academic mainstream, because their religiosity would have denuded the nature of the game, revealing what is at stake: namely, the kind of creed that underlies it

all—a worship of the Void complemented by a mock-matriarchal celebration of generation and devastation (especially a proclivity for the latter). And, above all, a manifest contempt for compassion, which the benevolent façade of our Liberal democracies will allow in deed but certainly not in discourse. As a result, the system has opted for manipulations of seminal texts, manipulations such as those of Bataille by Foucault and Baudrillard, of Foucault himself by Baudrillard and Hardt and Negri, or of Gnosis and Jünger by Heidegger, and to a very limited degree, of Heidegger and Kojève by Strauss.

In sum, Foucault, Heidegger, Strauss, and their imitators are, properly speaking, impostors, who have tampered with one original or another, creating as they went academic paradigms susceptible to ideological use, such as these stories of “minority power” squirting like a geyser, tales of “being-there” on the abyss of Nothingness, or a sham philology passing Plato for a Machiavellian. These paradigms are in essence instruments of power, as well as Trojan horses that have contrabanded antitraditional Gnostic myth into the walled perimeter of an area hitherto guarded ever more dubiously by monotheistic orthodoxy.

The present situation is not encouraging. While the process of “homogenization” (i.e., globalization) proceeds apace, and so does the centralization of policy making, the Churches have given way to this Gnostic onslaught, and dissent has disappeared. The state of war is chronic. Academia in the West is for the most part indentured to Big Business, and the only way out would appear to be an appeal to civil engagement at the grass roots—in the cities, towns, and villages of our nations. As mentioned previously, a number of important regional initiatives have been active in several parts of the world. By means of legislation designed to shelter local industry and entrepreneurship, we might look forward to creating a social base upon which a true universal trade of ideas, friendship, and goods could be established. It is then our hope that, relying on our innate desire to “help the world,” we shall succeed in recreating a wholesome movement of dissent across all divides, which will enable us to oppose war more decisively, to resist the flattening force of these corporate interests of globalization, and to defeat in our society the ideology of tyranny.

Notes

Preface

1. Paul Berman, *Terror and Liberalism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2003), p. 195.

Chapter 1

1. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: The New American Library, 1961 [1851]), p. 440.
2. Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense, Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (New York: Picador, 1998).
3. See for instance Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Macmillan, 1899), chapter 12.
4. The pioneering monographs on Neoconservatism and postmodernism by Professor Shadia Drury will be dealt with in chapter 8.
5. Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes* (OC) (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 12:223.
6. James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 384, emphasis added.
7. See for instance Benjamin Noys, *Georges Bataille, A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), pp. 43–44.
8. Bataille, OC, 12:223.

Chapter 2

1. Euripides, *The Bacchae*, trans. Philip Vellacot (New York: Penguin, 1972), p. 200.
2. As an alternative to St. Augustine's *religo*, Robert Graves suggests the etymology *Rellgio*, from *rem legere*, that is, the faculty “to choose or pick the right thing” (Robert Graves, *The White Goddess, A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966 [1948], p. 478). Etymology, indeed, whose meaning matches that of the Greek word *hairesis*, the root of *heresy*. Graves's suggestion may be taken for a half-disguised jibe.
3. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959), p. 96.

4. Ibid., p. 125.
5. Julius Evola, *Revolt Against the Modern World* (Rochester, VA: Inner Traditions, 1995 [1934]), p. 207, emphasis added.
6. Ibid., pp. 214–5.
7. Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, pp. 144–5.
8. Thorstein Veblen, *The Instinct of Workmanship and the State of Industrial Arts* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), pp. 94–101.
9. Evola, *Revolt*, p. 214, emphasis added.
10. Ibid., pp. 215–28.
11. Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, p. 103.
12. Robert Graves, *Greek Myths* (London: Penguin, 1955), p. 13.
13. Evola, *Revolt*, pp. 212–3, 222–3.
14. The thrall of woman's superior sexual endowment is a central theme in the world view of Sade, see chapter 4.
15. Evola, *Revolt*, pp. 223–4.
16. Graves later qualified that the “main maenad intoxicant has been *amanita muscaria*,” which is the technical name of the toadstool, the hallucinogenic fungus also sacred to the Aztec divinity Tlaloc. Dionysus, “sharing too many of [Tlaloc's] attributes,” must therefore be seen as the European counterpart of the Mexican divinity (Robert Graves, *White Goddess*, 1948, pp. 183, 45).
17. Graves, *Greek Myths*, pp. 13–20, emphasis added.
18. Ibid., p. 19.
19. Plato, *The Laws of Plato*, trans. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), see 717a, p. 103, for the worship of the gods of the underworld, and 828d, p. 219, for the related festivals.
20. Euripides, *The Bacchae*, p. 238.
21. Robert Graves, *White Goddess*, 1966, p. 242.
22. Sir James Frazer, *Golden Bough* (New York: Macmillan, 1955 [1922]), pp. 179, 313, 340–1.
23. Ibid., p. 337.
24. Joseph L. Henderson and Maud Oakes, *The Wisdom of the Serpent, The Myths of Death, Rebirth and Resurrection* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), p. 21, emphasis added.
25. Frazer, *Golden Bough*, p. 378.
26. Graves, *White Goddess*, p. 110.
27. Ibid.
28. Ean Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin* (London and New York: Arkana, 1985), p. 43.
29. Graves, *White Goddess*, pp. 24, 248.
30. Begg, *Black Virgin*, p. 44.
31. Frazer, *Golden Bough*, p. 384.
32. Graves, *White Goddess*, p. 174.
33. See chapter 5, subsection entitled “Eroticism,” pp. 49–59.
34. Ibid., p. 425.
35. Frazer, *Golden Bough*, pp. 401, 403, 449, 451.
36. Ibid., p. 546, emphasis added.
37. Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes* (OC), 11:69. For references in Bataille to *The Golden Bough*, see OC, 2:69, and *L'érotisme* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1957), footnote on p. 136.

38. Frazer, *Golden Bough*, pp. 694–703.
39. Ibid., pp. 666–8.
40. Ibid., p. 260.
41. Graves, *White Goddess*, p. 319.
42. Frazer, *Golden Bough*, p. 568.
43. Ibid., pp. 688–9.
44. See chapter 5, subsection entitled “Power”, pp. 66–78.
45. Bataille, OC, 7:264.
46. The snake monster of the Zoroastrian tradition, slain by the hero Marduk (St. Michael in Western mythology).
47. Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, pp. 77–9.
48. Bataille, OC, 10:281.
49. Ibid., 12:279.
50. “It is also known to ethnologists that [cosmetic pigments and preposterous garments applied to the person with a view to avoid falling short of the blamelessly best, and practices] of somewhat the same aesthetic value among the peoples of the lower cultures—as, e.g., tattooing and scarification, tooth-filling, nose-boring, lip-buttons—rest directly and unequivocally on the fear of losing prestige. And at this point, as indeed at many others, it is profitable to call to mind that the hereditary human nature of these Europeans and their colonies is still the same as that of their savage forebears was in the Neolithic Age, some ten or twelve thousand years ago” (Thorstein Veblen, *Absentee Ownership, and Business Enterprise in Recent Times—The Case of America*, New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1923, p. 311, emphasis added). The late penchant for piercing navels and noses, as well as ringing toes, might have its misty foundation in the ancient usage of fastening fish hooks on those parts of the body of a sick man so that “if his soul should try to escape it may be hooked and held fast” (Frazer, *Golden Bough*, p. 208). The practice of piercing will be mentioned again in connection with Bataille’s important reference to the Aztec culture, see chapter 5, subsection entitled “The Monstrous Archons,” pp. 42–9.
51. Ibid., 7:263.

Chapter 3

1. Plotinus, *Ennead II*, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 237–9.
2. Luigi Moraldi, ed., *I vangeli gnostici, vangeli di Tomaso, Maria, Verità, Filippo* (Milano: Aldephi Edizioni, 1999), p. 60.
3. See E. M. Cioran, *Précis de décomposition* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), pp. 94–7.
4. Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 12:482.
5. Jacques Lacarrière, *The Gnostics* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989 [1973]), p. 29.
6. Ibid., p. 37.
7. Manlio Simonetti, ed., *Testi gnostici in lingua greca e latina* (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori—Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, 1999), p. xi.
8. Ibid., the mention of the soul being a spark caught in matter occurs for instance in the teachings of Simon Magus (p. 16), and of the Sethians and Ophites (p. 124); for the quote by Carpocrates, see p. 194.
9. The Christian theologian Ireneus mentions in this respect the school of the Gnostic Basilides; his followers referred to themselves as “the perfects.” Ireneus deprecated the

perfects' participation in idolatrous, pagan festivities, and libidinal indulgence, and their engrossed attendance at violent spectacles such as the sports-like killing of wild animals and mortal combat of man against man in the amphitheater. Likewise, Bataille was thoroughly enthralled by Spanish bullfighting; his morbid experience of the corrida in Seville, as recounted in his first novel, *The Story of the Eye*, affords an interesting connection to the "infamies" indulged in by the Gnostic perfects (see chapter 5, pp. 49–51).

10. Ibid., this is related of the initiates of the Valentinian gnosis, p. 312.
11. Ibid., p. 186.
12. Ibid., this is from the teachings of Simon Magus, as confuted by Hypolitus, pp. 19, 33.
13. Ibid., pp. 87–95.
14. Ibid., pp. 101, 124–6, 140.
15. Ibid., p. 156.
16. Eventually, moved by the supplications of the other eons, the Father proceeded to reintegrate the sinful Sophia in the divine firmament by damming her overbearing passion and ignorance by means of the power of another force, an emanation of the Father himself, the so-called Limit (*to Oron*).
17. Ibid., pp. 288–90, 304, 308, 336, 386.
18. René Guénón, *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power* (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001 [1929]), p. 30n.

Chapter 4

1. Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes* (OC) (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 12:455.
2. Sade, *Justine ou les malheurs de la vertu* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert Editeur, 1957 [1791]), p. 279.
3. Ibid., p. 60.
4. Ibid., p. 310.
5. Ibid., p. 219.
6. Ibid., p. 277.
7. Ibid., pp. 60–1.
8. Ibid., p. 61.
9. Ibid., p. 64.
10. Ibid., p. 89.
11. Ibid., p. 92.
12. Ibid., p. 98.
13. Ibid., p. 99.
14. Ibid., p. 311.
15. Which, of course, is tempered, if not altogether overshadowed, by famous misogynous outbursts that brought him to depict woman as "a weak creature, always inferior to man, infinitely less beautiful than him, less ingenuous, less wise, built in a disgusting fashion, entirely opposed to what may please man, to what may delight him . . . an unwholesome being for three quarters of her life, incapable of satisfying her spouse throughout the time that Nature constrains her to child-bearing, of a bitter disposition, cantankerous, bossy: a tyrant if one grants her rights, low and groveling if held captive; yet always phony, always dangerous; a perverse creature. [. . .] The Persians, the Medes, the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans, did they lavish honor upon this odious sex, which we dare today make our idol? Alas! I see it

- oppressed everywhere, everywhere rigorously shut off from business, everywhere despised, debased, locked up; women, in brief: everywhere treated like beasts, which are disposed of in moment of need, and promptly shuffled back to the sheepfold" (D. A. F. De Sade, *Justine, ou les malheurs de la vertu*, Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1958 [1791], pp. 279–80).
16. Camille Berneri, *Journey Through Utopia* (London: Freedom Press, 1950), pp. 179–182.
 17. Sade, *Justine*, p. 232.
 18. Ibid., p. 319.
 19. Bataille, *L'érotisme* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1957), p. 202.
 20. Ibid., OC, 8:154.
 21. Ibid., *L'érotisme*, p. 212.
 22. Ibid., p. 214.
 23. Ibid., p. 216.
 24. Sade, *Justine*, p. 348.

Chapter 5

1. Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes* (OC) (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 1:82.
2. Ibid., 10:610.
3. Quoted from Pierre Prévost, *Georges Bataille & René Guénon, L'expérience souveraine* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1992), p. 15.
4. Ibid., p. 29.
5. Bataille, OC, 5:46.
6. Ibid., 11:19.
7. Ibid., 5:25
8. A brief mention of the Basque author, seen as a counteraltar to Bataille, appears for instance in Roland Champagne, *Georges Bataille* (London: Prentice Hall, 1998), p. 7.
9. Miguel de Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life* (New York: Dover, 1954 [1912]), p. 9.
10. Ibid., p. 43.
11. Ibid., pp. 184, 122, and 193.
12. Ibid., pp. 46–7, 116, 167, 168.
13. Bataille, OC, 5:139.
14. Ibid., pp. 140–1.
15. Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille, La mort à l'oeuvre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), pp. 120–1.
16. Bataille, OC, 1:550.
17. Ibid., 5:19.
18. Ibid., pp. 20, 21.
19. Ibid., 11:230.
20. Ibid., 5:22, 24.
21. Ibid., pp. 30–1, 50, emphasis added.
22. Ibid., 12:284; 3:30.
23. Ibid., 5:51.
24. Ibid., 8:146.
25. Ibid., p. 25.
26. Ibid., p. 69.
27. Ibid., p. 99.
28. Ibid., p. 121.

29. Ibid., pp. 69, 73.
30. Ibid., p. 74.
31. Ibid., 7:265.
32. Ibid., 8:74, 99.
33. Ibid., 7:271, emphasis added.
34. Ibid., 12:484.
35. Ibid., 1:211–2 and 443.
36. Ibid., 8:109–11.
37. Ibid., pp. 112–3.
38. Evola, *Revolt*, p. 233.
39. Warwick Bray, *Everyday Life of the Aztecs* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968), p. 172.
40. Georges Bataille, *La part maudite, précédé de la notion de dépense* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967 [1949]), p. 90.
41. Bray, *Aztecs*, p. 174.
42. Jack Weatherford, *The History of Money* (New York: Three Rivers, 1997), p. 17.
43. Bray, *Aztecs*, p. 163.
44. Bataille, OC, 1:152–7.
45. Ibid., 7:198.
46. Ibid., 1:201–4.
47. Archangels of evil, see p. 44 in this Chapter.
48. Ibid., 1:223.
49. Ibid., p. 224.
50. An obvious reference is Anton Lavey's *The Satanic Rituals* (New York: Avon Books, 1972).
51. Bataille, OC, 1:224–5.
52. Ibid., p. 244.
53. Ibid., 11:67.
54. Ibid., 7:68.
55. Ibid., pp. 68–9.
56. Ibid., 3:43.
57. Georges Bataille, *L'érotisme* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit), pp. 134, 135.
58. Bataille, OC, 5:240.
59. Ibid., 6:116.
60. Ibid., 2:380.
61. Ibid., 1:557.
62. Ibid., 8:147.
63. Ibid., 7:273, and 1:441, emphasis added.
64. Ibid., 1:445.
65. Surya, *Bataille*, pp. 288, 303, emphasis added.
66. Champagne, *Bataille*, pp. 13, 15.
67. Bataille, OC, 2:274.
68. Ibid., 3:455.
69. Ibid., 8:114.
70. Ernst Jünger, *Eumeswil* (New York: Marsilio, 1993 [1977]), p. 208.
71. Surya, *Bataille*, p. 128.
72. Ibid., pp. 105, 158, and 178.
73. Prévost, *Bataille & Guénon*, p. 63.
74. Bataille, OC, 1:13–69.

75. Published posthumously in 1967.
76. Surya, *Bataille*, p. 392.
77. Bataille, OC, 4:47–50.
78. Ibid., 3:22.
79. See Surya, *Bataille*, p. 372.
80. Ibid., p. 24.
81. Ibid., p. 374.
82. Bataille, OC, 12:280.
83. Bataille, *L'érotisme*, pp. 204–5.
84. Bataille, OC, 11:181–5.
85. Ibid., 8:268–70.
86. Ibid., p. 277.
87. Bataille, *L'érotisme*, p. 60.
88. Bataille, OC, 8:12.
89. Ibid., 10:581.
90. Bataille, *L'érotisme*, p. 68.
91. Bataille, OC, 8:81, 83.
92. Ibid., p. 152.
93. Bataille, *L'érotisme*, p. 57.
94. Ibid., p. 41.
95. Ibid., p. 43.
96. Ibid., p. 72.
97. Ibid., p. 96, and Bataille, OC, 8:90.
98. Bataille, *L'érotisme*, p. 125.
99. Ibid., p. 131.
100. Bataille, OC, 2:344.
101. Ibid., 6:43.
102. Ibid., 2:346.
103. Ibid., OC, 8:17.
104. Bataille, *L'érotisme*, p. 206.
105. Ibid., p. 213.
106. Bataille, OC, 7:369.
107. Ibid., 8:297.
108. Ibid., 10:295.
109. Ibid.
110. Ibid., p. 279.
111. Ibid., p. 294.
112. Ibid., 9:204.
113. Ibid., 10:278.
114. Ibid., pp. 310–1.
115. Ibid., p. 312.
116. Ibid., p. 327.
117. Ernst Jünger, *Das Abenteurliche Herz, Figuren und Capriccios* (Hamburg: Hanseatische Veralgsanstalt, 1938), p. 124, and Ernst Jünger, *Heliopolis, Rückblick auf eine Stadt* (Tübingen, Germany: Heliopolis Verlag, 1949), p. 101.
118. Surya, *Bataille*, p. 561.
119. Bataille, OC, 10:311.
120. Ibid., p. 281.
121. Ibid., p. 318.

122. Ibid., p. 321.
123. Ibid., 5:200.
124. Ibid., 8:372.
125. Ibid., 1:303.
126. Bataille, *La part maudite*, p. 143.
127. Bataille, OC, 1:305.
128. Ibid., pp. 306–8.
129. Eliade, *Sacred & Profane*, p. 97.
130. Bataille, OC, 2:371.
131. Ibid., 8:126, emphasis added.
132. Ibid., 10:313.
133. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Macmillan, 1899); see for instance chapters 8 to 10.
134. Ibid., p. 20.
135. Bataille, OC, 10:602.
136. See Thorstein Veblen, *Instinct of Workmanship*, and the State of Industrial Arts (New York: Macmillan, 1914), chapter 2, and *Leisure Class*, p. 219.
137. Veblen, *Leisure Class*, p. 18.
138. Bataille, OC, 10:603–4.
139. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation, The Political and Economics Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), pp. 48–58.
140. Bataille, OC, 1:309.
141. Ibid., p. 310.
142. Ibid., p. 314.
143. Bataille, *La part maudite*, p. 38.
144. Bataille, OC, 7:211, 217.
145. Ibid., 1:340.
146. Ibid., 10:604.
147. Bataille, *La part maudite*, p. 66.
148. Ibid., p. 76.
149. Bataille, OC, 1:472.
150. Bataille, *La part maudite*, pp. 224–5, emphasis added.
151. Bataille, OC, 12:515.
152. Ibid., 1:347.
153. Ibid., 5:99.
154. Ibid., 1:291.
155. Surya, *Bataille*, p. 318.
156. Bataille, OC, 1:291.
157. Ibid., p. 346.
158. Ibid., 7:323.
159. Ibid., 1:436.
160. Ibid., p. 437.
161. Ibid., p. 438, emphasis added.
162. Cited in Surya, *Bataille*, p. 114.
163. Bataille, OC, 2:310.
164. Ibid., p. 311.
165. Ibid., p. 338.
166. Ibid., p. 331.
167. Jünger, *Eumeswil*, p. 250.

168. Bataille, OC, 2:319.
169. Ibid., p. 336.
170. Ibid., p. 341.
171. Ibid., pp. 342–3.
172. Max Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (In *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionsoziologie I*, Tübingen, Germany; J. C. B. Mohr, 1922 [1905]), and *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Gerth and Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 196–244.
173. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of Business Enterprise* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904), pp. 196–244.
174. Rudolf Steiner, *Evil, Selected Lectures by Rudolf Steiner* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1997).
175. Werner Sombart, *The Quintessence of Capitalism, a Study of the History and Psychology of the Modern Businessman (Der Bourgeois)*, (London: T. F. Unwin, 1915).
176. For Guénon, the royalty, “in order to ‘centralize’ and to absorb in itself the powers that belong collectively to all the nobility, enters into a struggle with the nobility and works relentlessly toward the destruction of the very feudal system from which it had itself issued. It can do so, moreover, only by relying on the support of the third estate [. . .]. The very phrase “state religion” is a deliberate equivocation signifying fundamentally nothing else than that religion is used by temporal power to ensure its own domination; it is religion reduced to no more than a factor of the social order” (René Guénon, *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power*, Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 1929, pp. 59, 61).
177. René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and the Sign of the Times* (New York: Penguin, 1972 [1945]).
178. Bataille, OC, 2:342.
179. Ibid., pp. 345, 346.
180. Ibid., 1:351–3.
181. Ibid., p. 353.
182. Ibid., 2:342.
183. Ibid., p. 347.
184. Ibid., 1:346.
185. Ibid., p. 351.
186. Ibid., p. 350.
187. Ibid., p. 364.
188. Ibid., pp. 351, 352.
189. Ibid., pp. 457–8.
190. See for instance Otto Rahn's *La cour de Lucifer, Voyage au coeur de la plus haute spiritualité européenne (Luzifers Hofgesind/Eine reise zu den guten Geistern Europas)*, Puiseaux, France: Éditions Pardès, 1994 [1937]. Otto Rahn was a talented ethnologist who joined the ranks of the SS.
191. Bataille, OC, 2:347.
192. Ibid., p. 326, emphasis added.
193. Ibid., 1:361, emphasis added.
194. Ibid., 11:182.
195. Edward Crankshaw, *Gestapo, Instrument of Tyranny* (New York: Viking, 1956), p. 232.
196. Bataille, OC, 11:180.
197. Ibid., p. 185.

198. One may include the pacific Demetrian cult in this component.
199. Surya, *Bataille*, p. 597.
200. Bataille, OC, 12:223.
201. Champagne, *Bataille*, p. 103.
202. Bataille, OC, 1:440.
203. Michael Richardson, *Georges Bataille* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 130.

Chapter 6

1. Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 346.
2. James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 16.
3. David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (London: Hutchinson, 1993), p. xi.
4. We shall have something to say in this connection with the work of Kojève (chapter 8).
5. The juxtaposition of the Apollinian and the Dionysian featured in our previous schema is of Nietzschean provenance (form his classic *The Birth of the Tragedy*). Although, adopting this dichotomous conception, which is truly one of the standard themes of classical philology, does by no means imply that, at heart, the thought of Nietzsche was intimately connected with Bataille's attempt to rehabilitate the "monstrous archons."
6. Michel Foucault, *Présentation* of Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes* (OC) (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 1:5.
7. Macey, *The Lives*, p. 137.
8. Ibid., p. 109.
9. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972 [1961]), p. 18.
10. Ibid., p. 26.
11. Cited in Miller, *Passion*, p. 100.
12. Bataille, OC, 8:102.
13. Foucault, *Folie*, pp. 37, 37.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., p. 40.
16. Ibid., p. 237.
17. Ibid., pp. 46–53.
18. Ibid., p. 89, emphasis added.
19. Ibid., pp. 510–1.
20. Ibid., p. 205.
21. Miller, *Passion*, p. 104.
22. Foucault, *Folie*, p. 113.
23. Foucault, *Reader*, p. 146.
24. Foucault, *Folie*, pp. 139–47.
25. Ibid., p. 453.
26. Cited in Miller, *Passion*, p. 101.
27. Foucault, *Folie*, p. 552.
28. Ibid., p. 245.
29. Ibid., p. 593.
30. Ibid., p. 104.
31. Macey, *The Lives*, p. 129.
32. Cited in Miller, *Passion*, p. 105.

33. Ibid., pp. 642, 657.
34. Macey, *The Lives*, pp. 114, 117, 158.
35. Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, vol. 2 (New York: Free Press, 1998), 2:96.
36. Ibid., pp. 127–8.
37. Roland Champagne, *Georges Bataille* (London: Prentice Hall, 1998), p. 13.
38. Foucault, *Aesthetics*, pp. 124, 126, emphasis added.
39. Ibid., p. 71.
40. Ibid., p. 73.
41. Ibid., p. 133.
42. Ibid., pp. 72–3.
43. Ibid., p. 150.
44. Foucault, *Reader*, p. 119.
45. Macey, *The Lives*, p. 160.
46. Ibid., p. 480.
47. Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses, Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 49.
48. Ibid., p. 15.
49. Ibid., p. 60.
50. To get a taste of Foucault's gibberish on the theme of monetary economics, consult Foucault, *Les mots*, pp. 180, 187, 198, and 202.
51. Ibid., p. 365.
52. Macey, *The Lives*, p. 203.
53. Ibid., p. 201.
54. Ibid., p. 177.
55. Miller, *Passion*, p. 159.
56. Ibid., p. 158.
57. Macey, *The Lives*, p. 184.
58. Ibid., p. 221.
59. Ibid., p. 226.
60. Miller, *Passion*, p. 181.
61. Ibid., p. 175.
62. Macey, *The Lives*, p. 241.
63. Miller, *Passion*, p. 184.
64. Macey, *The Lives*, p. 243.
65. Miller, *Passion*, p. 180.
66. Ibid., pp. 199–200.
67. Ibid., p. 205.
68. Ibid.
69. Macey, *The Lives*, p. 251.
70. Miller, *Passion*, pp. 227–8.
71. Macey, *The Lives*, pp. 257, 285.
72. Bataille, OC, 1:211.
73. Macey, *The Lives*, p. 334.
74. Bataille, OC, 2:371.
75. Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir, naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), p. 13.
76. Ibid., pp. 14, 15.
77. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings, 1972–1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 104.

78. Foucault, *Surveiller*, p. 16.
79. Karl Polanyi, *Great Transformation, The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001 [1957]), especially pp. 108–15.
80. Foucault, *Surveiller*, p. 17.
81. Ibid.
82. Ibid., p. 90.
83. Ibid., p. 72.
84. Ibid., p. 67.
85. Ibid., pp. 83, 90.
86. Ibid., p. 22.
87. Ibid., pp. 28, 30.
88. Ibid., p. 31.
89. Ibid.
90. Ibid., pp. 31–2.
91. Ibid., pp. 32–3.
92. Half of the Bataillean fresco has disappeared from view. In the Economic Surplus chart (Figure 5.2, p. 75), it is as if all social tension had been limited and confined to the gray area, which depicts the circle of contemporary, homogeneous power—the power of Liberal democracies.
93. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, p. 64.
94. Foucault, *Surveiller*, p. 33.
95. Ibid., p. 34.
96. Ibid., p. 172.
97. See chapter 8, pp. 139.
98. Ibid., p. 139.
99. Ibid., pp. 140, 144, 151, 172, 175, 185.
100. Ibid., pp. 196, 203.
101. Ibid., p. 282, emphasis added.
102. Ibid., pp. 282, 283, 285, 288.
103. Ibid., pp. 288–9.
104. Ibid., p. 296.
105. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, pp. 81–2, emphasis added.
106. Ibid., p. 83, emphasis added.
107. Ibid., p. 87.
108. Ibid., p. 97.
109. Ibid., p. 98.
110. Ibid., p. 159.
111. Miller, *Passion*, pp. 320–1.
112. Ibid., p. 239.
113. Foucault, *Reader*, p. 271.
114. Ibid., p. 270.
115. Foucault, *Aesthetics*, p. 227.
116. Macey, *The Lives*, p. 430.
117. Miller, *Passion*, p. 264.
118. Foucault, *Reader*, p. 346.
119. Ibid., pp. 350–1.
120. Miller, *Passion*, p. 310.
121. Ibid., p. 351.
122. Ibid., p. 55.

Chapter 7

1. Erasmus, Desiderius, *Encomium Moriae* (1511), LII. Erasmo da Rotterdam, *Elogio della Follia* (Milano, Arnaldo Mondadori Editore, 1992), pp. 83–4.
2. Lyotard's input on education is dealt with in this chapter, whereas Baudrillard's postmodern contribution will be tackled in chapter 9.
3. Roger Burbach, *Globalization and Postmodern Politics, From Zapatistas to High-Tech Robber Barons* (London: Pluto, 2001), p. 69.
4. Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 74.
5. Honi Fern Haber, *Beyond Postmodern Politics, Lyotard, Rorty, Foucault* (New York, London: Routledge, 1994), p. 90.
6. Ibid., pp. 91–4.
7. Glen Jordan and Chris Wheedon, *Cultural Politics, Class, Gender, Race and the Postmodern World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 4.
8. David Ruccio and Jack Amariglio, *Postmodern Moments in Modern Economics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 27.
9. Ibid., p. 28.
10. Ibid.
11. See for example Jack Z. Bratich, Jeremy Packer, and Cameron McCarthy, *Foucault, Cultural Studies, and Governmentality* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), pp. 4–5 and 47.
12. Russell Jacoby, *The End of Utopia, Politics and Culture in the Age of Apathy* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 88.
13. Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne, Rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979), p. 7.
14. Michael Peters, "Introduction: Lyotard, Education and the Postmodern Condition," in *Education and the Postmodern Condition*, ed. Michael Peters (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1995), pp. xxv, xxvi.
15. Ibid., p. xxviii.
16. Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*, p. 11.
17. Ibid., p. 77.
18. Giuliano Preparata, *Fine di millennio, fine della storia, fine della scienza: fantasie della globalizzazione?* Unpublished manuscript, 1999, p. 4.
19. Ibid., p. 2.
20. Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*, p. 48.
21. Ibid., p. 31.
22. Peters, *Education*, p. 6.
23. Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*, pp. 79–80.
24. Ibid., pp. 81–2.
25. Ibid., p. 83.
26. Ibid., p. 84–5.
27. Ibid., pp. 87–8.
28. Ibid., p. 84.
29. Ibid., pp. 87–8.
30. A. T. Nguyen, "Lyotard and Rorty on the Principle of the Professor," in Peters, *Education*, p. 48.
31. Ibid., p. 54.
32. Maurice R. Berube, *Radical reformers, The Influence of the Left in American Education* (Greenwich, CT: Information Age, 2004), p. 10, and Maurice R. Berube, *Beyond*

- Modernism and Postmodernism, Essays on the Politics of Culture* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 2002), pp. 92–3.
33. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 81.
 34. Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*, p. 106.
 35. Ibid., pp. 103–4.
 36. Ibid., p. 107.
 37. Thorstein Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1918), pp. 3, 4, 6, 8, and 75.
 38. Ibid., p. 8.
 39. Ibid., pp. 16, 43–4, emphasis added.
 40. Ibid., p. 85, emphasis added.
 41. Ibid., p. 221.
 42. Ibid., pp. 112, 176–7, 184, and 192, emphasis added.
 43. Ibid., p. 185.
 44. Ibid., pp. 226, 128.
 45. Julian Pefanis, *Heterology and the Postmodern: Bataille, Baudrillard and Lyotard* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 39.
 46. Tomasz Szkudlarek, *The Problem of Freedom in Postmodern Education* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1993), pp. 102–3, 98.
 47. Ibid., p. 8.
 48. Jacoby, *The End of Utopia*, pp. 39–47.
 49. Szkudlarek, *Problem of Freedom*, p. 108.
 50. Jordan and Wheedon, *Cultural Politics*, pp. 9–11.
 51. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 254.
 52. Ibid., p. 270.
 53. Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts, Eine Bewertung der seelisch-geistigen Gestaltenkämpfe unserer Zeit* (Munich: Hoheneichen-Verlag, 1930), p. 76.
 54. Murray Friedman, *What Went Wrong? The Creation and Collapse of the Black-Jewish Alliance* (New York: Free Press, 1995), p. 13.
 55. Berube, *Beyond Modernism*, p. 117, emphasis added.
 56. Michael Richardson, *Georges Bataille* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 83, 84, 81, emphasis added.
 57. Robert Eaglestone, *Postmodernism and Holocaust Denial* (Duxford, Cambridge: Icon Books, 2001), p. 60.
 58. Christopher Norris, *The Truth about Postmodernism* (Oxford; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), p. 300.
 59. Ibid., p. 297.
 60. Eaglestone, *Holocaust Denial*, p. 63.
 61. Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, vol. 2 (New York: Free Press, 1998) p. 226.
 62. Jordan and Wheedon, *Cultural Politics*, p. 7.
 63. *The Economist*, “MOBO phonic,” September 2, 2004, p. 55.
 64. Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, “Gems and Baubles in Empire,” in *Debating Empire*, ed. Gopal Balakrishnan (London, New York: Verso, 2003), p. 52.
 65. Malcolm Tilly, “You Can’t Build a New Society with a Stanley Knife,” in Balakrishnan, *Debating Empire*, p. 83.

66. Alex Callinicos, "Toni Negri in Perspective," in Balakrishnan, *Debating Empire*, p. 126.
67. See for instance Giovanni Fasanella, Claudio Sestieri and Giovanni Pellegrino, *Segreto di Stato, La verità da Gladio al caso Moro* (Turin: Einaudi, 2000), pp. 125–240.
68. Tilly, "You Can't Build . . .," p. 83.
69. Callinicos, "Toni Negri in Perspective," pp. 127–9.
70. For an example of this sort of speculation, see Elliot Cohen "History and Hyperpower," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2004.
71. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 179–80.
72. Ibid., p. xii.
73. Ibid., p. 46.
74. Ibid., pp. xiii–xiv.
75. Ibid., p. xiv, emphasis added.
76. Ibid., p. xv.
77. Ibid., p. 39.
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Chapter 9

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The *Ideology of Tyranny* traces the contemporary jargon of political correctness and the so-called “politics of diversity” so prevalent in the academic and administrative discourse of the United States to the fantastic sociology of an obscure French pornographer, Georges Bataille (1897–1962). The celebration of violence sung in his works, re-elaborated in abstract form by the late followers of Bataille, has led to the creation of a peculiar talk emphasizing difference, antagonism, intellectual despair, and a profound political conservatism. As the so-called Left has lately come to adopt this troubling gospel of divisiveness, the consequence for a wholesome culture of dissent in our society has been a disastrous paralysis of its critical and moral faculties in the face of a new dawn of never-ending wars.

“*The Ideology of Tyranny* exposes a bankrupt mode of thought, clearing the way for a re-invigorated philosophy and social science of unembarrassed fealty to centrality and truth. What’s more, it is an entertaining read, thoroughly unpretentious, jargon-free, and marked by scintillating argument. Preparata makes a compelling, unique, and truly remarkable contribution to our understanding of postmodernism, and especially Foucault.”

—David MacGregor, Professor of Sociology at King’s University College, University of Western Ontario, and author of *The Communist Ideal in Hegel and Marx*

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